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University Essays

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CLASS OF NONVIOLENCE

The Town That Defied the Holocaust

By Grace Scales Yoder

We must set the scene. The year is 1943. Icicles hang like gloom from roofs in the remote French village. In better weather, it is a six-hour drive to Paris. During this dreary winter, however, few persons brave the tortuous roads as far as the next town.

The village is Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, a fleck on the French map with little to distinguish it from similar villages throughout the Cevennes Mountains. Le Chambon is in the free zone; it has escaped German occupation. But not for much longer; the Nazis swarm through central France seeking to eradicate Jews and the underground.

Le Chambon is in Protestant country. In Roman Catholic France, small enclaves of Huguenots still practice the Calvinistic religion of their forebears. These are peasants, but they are performing a heroic task: they are concealing several hundred refugees, most of whom are Jewish.

They do this knowing that anyone caught hiding Jews is subject to arrest, deportation, and even death. The clandestine effort is led by the fiery Huguenot pastor, Andre Trocme and his soft-spoken assistant, Edouard Theis. They collaborate with American Quakers and the Salvation Army.

Vichy officials know that Le Chambon is nicknamed the “Jewish nest in Protestant country,” but they have been loathe to prosecute fellow countrymen. So as long as the Chambonese cover their tracks well, Vichy police look the other way.

But not so the Germans. As the Nazi presence grows, the two pastors periodically slip out of town to avoid arrest. But their clandestine network continues. Le Chambon is the

main way station in an underground railroad spanning convents and farms from southern France to Geneva.

Some 2,500 Jews will pass through Chambon before the war ends. The 1,000 inhabitants don’t expect recognition for their efforts, but in a generation they will nonetheless be immortalized.

Five years ago, Philip Hallie’s **Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed** popularized the story of Le Chambon. Hallie, a philosophy professor at Wesleyan University, had become disillusioned — even cynical — as he explored ethical rationalizations for the Holocaust. Le Chambon’s weaponless resistance to the Nazis convinced him that humanity is capable of genuine good.

Two years after Hallie’s book hits U.S. bookstores, I am in France on a grant to study French Protestantism. Several pastors tell me that Le Chambon is their spiritual capital. I trek to Le Chambon to see whether it is as Hallie portrayed it.

I have written to 82-year-old Edouard Theis, the quieter of the wartime pastor-leaders (Andre Trocme died in the mid-sixties.) Theis has retired to a hamlet 30 minutes from Le Chambon and offers to accompany me on visits to elderly Chambonese who led the refugee effort.

Our first stop is the home of Mme. Barraud, a slender widow no more than four feet eight inches tall. Her story unfolds as it surely must have for Hallie — how she operated a boardinghouse for students who were, in the main, East European refugees; how an anonymous phone call would warn of a raid, and her boarders would flee to the woods as

Gestapo trucks pulled in at the presbytery; and finally, how during a raid, her daughter was accidentally shot to death.

The conversation veers to Hallie's book. Mme. Barraud says she knows enough English to make out most of it. Her reaction: "What's the big deal? Mr. Hallie acts as if we did something extraordinary. We did the only decent thing."

Everyone I talk with in Le Chambon — including Pastor Theis — shares this business-as-usual attitude about risking one's life for others. Mme. Barraud's modesty aside, Le Chambon's effort truly was exceptional.

But why did it happen? Perhaps the extraordinary effort was rooted in the Reformed faith of the inhabitants. Certainly religious commitment was central to saving the refugees. But there must have been more to the effort. Other towns within a fifty-mile radius — as Protestant as Le Chambon — did little to help refugees. Many Frenchmen willingly hid Jews when they happened by. But Pastors Trocme and Theis did more: they asked the Quakers to send refugees their way. Also, the pastors found money and supplies to make the project feasible, first from Quakers and later from the Cimade, an ecumenical service organization whose sole mission was to help refugees. At the ministers' behest, the Cimade set up a refugee center near Le Chambon. After the Nazis invaded southern France, the Cimade manufactured false identity cards and negotiated with Swiss officials to gain asylum for the refugees, who were led along an underground railroad into Switzerland. Theis worked closely with the group in smuggling refugees. For this, he spent many a night in Swiss jails.

The inhabitants of Le Chambon knew early something of the stake involved in saving Jews. Theis recalls a talk given to regional

Reformed Church leaders soon after the 1940 surrender, warning that Germany's anti-Semitic policies could lead to disaster for European Jews. The speaker was Andre Philip, leader in the nascent Resistance movement.

"That meeting convinced Trocme that Le Chambon should become a haven for anyone persecuted during the war," Theis said. Trocme took his idea to the town's officials and the church presbyterial council. Both groups were easily persuaded that Le Chambon should become a refuge.

Miss Lesley Maber, a British teacher who has lived in Le Chambon since the thirties, believes that the Huguenot tradition of clandestine workshop, developed during centuries of persecution, contributed to the Chambonese's sensitivity to persecution of others.

"When I first moved here, I was struck by how the Camisard wars — the oppressions of two hundred years ago — were recounted as if they were yesterday," she says. (The Camisard wars of 1702-1704 pitted makeshift Protestant insurgents against royal French troops, who finally won.)

Andre Chamson, a Cevenole Protestant and member of the elite Academie Francaise, observes that Protestants of southern France are marked by persecution unlike that anywhere else in the world. This theme pervades many of his novels and essays.

Moreover, during the war, the French Reformed Church encouraged its leaders to oppose fascism. The teachings of Swiss theologian, Karl Barth, provided spiritual impetus. His emphasis that one must obey God above all other considerations fitted conveniently with the tales of Camisard insurgence that were still popular in Le Chambon. Protestants often are regarded as political mavericks in France, fitting

in neither Right nor Left. “Here in the south of France,” said Jean Valette, a regional director of the Reformed Church, “Protestantism has traditionally been strong. One also finds more local governments opposing the status quo. The two are interrelated.”

While Trocme and Theis were hatching a grand scheme for their tiny parish, many French were rationalizing that Germans were fighting the Communists and that it must be a good thing. Vichy was their punishment for the political evils of the thirties — such as paying higher wages to workers and flirting with Communism during the Popular Front years. It was for history to determine which view was right.

Publication of **Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed** has not changed Le Chambon. Though its elderly citizens seek no publicity, they are obviously glad their work is not forgotten. One wonders, though, whether Chambon

youth realize what their grandparents did. Le Chambon is still little visited; most strangers are just passing through. Occasional Jews still make a pilgrimage here, if only to read the Hebrew plaque across from the Reformed Church. Perhaps the biggest change since the war is demographic: the population is now about evenly split between Protestants and Catholics.

One leaves believing that the elderly Chambonese — most now in their eighties — would harbor refugees again. But not because an American professor wrote a nice book about them. They would do it because it is the decent thing to do.

As Pastor Theis and I finish chatting with Mme. Barraud and gather our things to leave, she invites me to return. “Next time you visit,” she says with a heavy Cevenole accent, “Just let me know. I have plenty of room upstairs; I’d love to have you.”

She means it.

Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed

By Philip Hallie

Cadaverous as they were — their yellow complexion may have come from the only staple of their diet, rutabagas — the prisoners' camaraderie was magnificent and lifted the three men's hearts.

That first evening in the camp, Trocme, joking with the others, opened up the roll of toilet paper in order to share it with them. On the outer sheets, he found, written in pencil, verses of consolation from the Bible. He stopped laughing, and so did his new friends. Magda believes the Darbystes, who knew the Bible by heart, might have written them; Trocme himself believed it was a member of his parish. But whoever wrote them, those verses reminded Trocme that he was still a part of Le Chambon.

In the course of a few days, the Chambonnais learned much about their fellow inmates. They learned that most of them were the leaders of the most important Communist cells in southwest France; some of these leaders had been interned here since the Hitler-Stalin Pact of 1939. Some of them were Catholics who had opposed Vichy's dictatorial and anti-Semitic policies. And there was one nonbelieving Protestant whose only mark of distinction was that he attached himself to the Chambonnais from the very beginning, only out of greed for the gifts they were getting from the village.

At first, the three nonviolent Protestants were severely criticized by some of these people. Some thought that they were, or at least might well be, moutons (black sheep) who had been placed there to betray the most active resisters by passing information to Vichy about their hopes and hatreds and plans. But these made a small group, or at least a quiet one. The group who

openly and regularly attacked the Protestants was the Communists, who were angry and bitter at their nonviolence. "You refuse to kill!" they would say. "Why, in war - and we are in a state of war with Vichy and Germany - that's aiding and abetting the enemy! You're peddling the same old opiate of the people that has kept the masses from moving forward to social justice!"

But it did not take Trocme long to show them that they and their people in Le Chambon were as vigorous and daring in their resistance to Vichy and Germany as the most aggressive inmates in the camp. He had always disliked intensely the connotations of the term "pacifist", with its suggestions of passivity and even retreat, and his few remarks about the activities in the village of Le Chambon swiftly persuaded most of them that, in their own way, by their own principles, the people of the village were doing the best they could against the powers dominating Europe and threatening to dominate the world.

One evening in the course of their first weeks in the camp, Trocme and twenty-nine other prisoners were listening to a BBC broadcast emanating from a radio concealed in a jar. Suddenly, the announcer stopped the quiet flow of information with an announcement: The battle of Stalingrad was over; the Germans had suffered the most terrible defeat in the history of the Third Reich. All of the thirty men in the barracks room burst into cheers.

But the same outward signs concealed basic inward differences among them. Those patriotic followers of de Gaulle, the members of his Secret Army, were full of joy at the prospect of their country's liberation after

three years of deprivation, humiliation and death at the hands of the Germans. To them, this was the beginning of France's rebirth. The Communists, most of them Partisan Sharpshooters, cheered for the victory of Russia and of Communism. They saw this not as a national matter, but as one involving all the downtrodden peoples of the world. At last, institutionalized cruelty, capitalistic Fascism, suffered a truly major defeat. For them, this moment was the beginning of a glorious epoch when the weak ones of the earth, the workers of the world, would have their chains smashed by a victorious Communist Russia.

But Trocme, Theis and Darcissac had other thoughts. They too saw Hitler as a monster who had invented and mobilized a great evil; and they too rejoiced at this, his most significant defeat thus far. But, for them, the killing that had created this great victory over murder and humiliation was itself evil, de Gaulle's Secret Army was an army dedicated to military victory by means of killing; the Communists were an international force eager to use any means, including killing and the hatred that motivates killing, to eliminate institutionalized cruelty from the face of the earth; but though the Chambonnais were friends of France and friends of the weak, the poor people of the earth, for them human life was so precious that they found it impossible to justify the killing that had produced this great victory.

Unlike other groups in the camp, political doctrines were not part of their thinking. An intimate, ethical and religious judgment caused their deep ambivalence about the victory at Stalingrad. Trocme had a desire (as he put it in his notebooks) "not to be separated from Jesus." What this meant to him was that

God had shown mankind how precious man was to Him by taking the form of a human being and coming down to help human beings find their deepest happiness. Trocme believed also that Jesus had demonstrated that love for mankind by dying for us on the cross. And if these beliefs sounded too mysterious, he knew that Jesus had himself refused to do violence to mankind, refused to harm the enemies of his precious existence as a human being. In short, Jesus was for Trocme the embodied forgiveness of sins, and staying close to Jesus meant always being ready to forgive your enemies instead of torturing and killing them. Trocme could not bear to separate himself from Jesus by ignoring the precious quality of human life that God had demonstrated in the birth, the life and the crucifixion of His son.

When, decades later, I asked Edouard Theis whether he and Trocme believed that the Soviet Union should have used means other than violence to protect herself from the Germans, he answered, "No. They had to use violence then. It was too late for nonviolence. Both the Germans and the Russians were embarques, committed to mass murder — that is, to warfare—and they had to play out their terrible roles upon each other. Besides," he added, "nonviolence involves preparation and organization, methods patiently and unswervingly employed — the Russians knew nothing of all this. Nonviolence must have deep roots and strong branches before it can bear the fruit it bore in Le Chambon. Nonviolence for them would have been suicide; it was too late."

While the cheering was going on, Theis and Trocme could not express these convictions to their newfound friends. But in the course of the weeks that followed that momentous announcement, the old inmates came to understand that the three Huguenots were

brave men who had spent the past three years leading a whole village into stubborn, active resistance against the cruel ones of the earth. Bravery, especially humble, efficacious bravery, not simply inner spiritual fortitude, was for most of the inmates an impressive virtue, and so with every passing day, understanding and warmth increased and made the newcomers the spiritual nucleus of the camp. They envisioned a school that would draw its students and faculty from around the world by virtue of its excellence, by virtue of the fine air of Le Chambon, and by virtue of its freedom from bureaucratic red tape; a school that had a spirit, the spirit of nonviolence, a spirit of internationalism and peace, even though the main function of the curriculum was to be that of preparing teenagers for their baccalaureates.

Such a school would keep the tradesmen and artisans of the village occupied during the winter months if it grew to any appreciable size, since the village was small and isolated, and students, faculty and visitors would have their needs. It would keep the village alive until the tourists came back. But, of equal importance, it would help the world outside Le Chambon by sending into it graduates with a deep understanding of the possibility and meaning of nonviolence in a violent world.

By 1938, Andre Trocme had found the person he needed to help him start the school: his silent, elephantine friend from University of Paris days, Edouard Theis. Theis had experience as a teacher — he had taught in America, Madagascar and the Cameroons. And Theis was a conscientious objector. Part of his livelihood would come from the parish, since he would be half-time pastor at the temple, and another part would come from his activities as first director of the school and teacher of French, Latin and Greek.

In the fall of 1938, the school was tiny, comprising four teachers and eighteen students. There were other teachers, including Mildred Theis and Magda Trocme, but they were not paid. There was patchwork to be done; they had no teacher of the sciences and had to send their students to Roger Darcissac's public Boys' School in order to fill this gap. But this was easy to manage, since Darcissac was secretary of the parish and soon a devoted friend of Trocme. He arranged the whole matter without consulting his superiors in the public school system of France.

Behind the temple there was an annex, divided into sections by very thin walls; here the first language lessons were given, and since one could hear what was happening in the next room about as well as one could hear what was happening in one's own, the place sounded like the Tower of Babel. The temple and its annex were on one side of a busy road, and Darcissac's Boys' School was on the other side of it, facing the temple. The students had to walk around the temple and cross the road in order to study the sciences.

The first few years of the school's history were very difficult for reasons other than convenience, however. From 1938 to 1940, Hitler's Germany was growing in military power and bellicosity, and fear and hatred of the Germans were rising in France.

Conscientious objection to war was being attacked more and more passionately as unpatriotic, dangerous sentimentality. And so when they most needed support, at the founding of the school, Trocme and Theis found themselves deserted by many conscientious objectors, whose patriotism and distrust of Germany were stronger than their love for peace. Many of the pacifists had based their beliefs upon their confidence in the promises of

Hitler, but as more and more of those promises were being violated by the Germans, more and more conscientious objectors gave up their nonviolence.

But Trocme's and Theis' nonviolence had a more stable foundation than that of confidence in the Germans. It was based upon the belief that in the Bible, God told us not to kill our fellow man and gave that commandment utter clarity in the life and death of Jesus Christ. And Trocme had a practical belief, a belief that held out for him a promise of success: he believed that love — that feeling, thinking, and acting as if life is precious beyond all price — would manage to find a way to restrain what his notes call “diabolical forces like Nazism.”

What saved the school was not only Trocme's clear statement of this position to the parish but also the political structure of the Protestant churches of France. Local independence is crucial in that structure. Parishioners elect a presbyterial council, and this council has very great power. It chooses, oversees and, if need be, dismisses its pastors with no substantial consultation with regional or national synods. The presbyterial council of Le Chambon endorsed Trocme's nonviolence and vowed to support him if war came, and he was legally designated as a conscientious objector. Since such a designation would make him a violator of the law, such a vow on their part expressed great loyalty to their pastor. Just as Trocme would not separate himself from Jesus by hating and killing his fellow man, so the Chambonnais would not separate themselves from their energetic minister.

As Hitler grew in power by actions that dropped nations into his hand like ripe plums, the school grew in size. In a few years, when somebody asked the stationmaster of the tiny railroad station where the Cevenol School was,

he would sweep his arms around and say, “The school is everywhere.” There were students, faculty and classrooms throughout the village. For their classwork, students usually stayed in a given room, and their teachers came and went, usually on the run, “like poisoned rats,” as the teachers put it.

One of the reasons for the rapid growth of the school was the coming of refugees from Central and Eastern Europe. The love of tyranny and the hatred of the Jew in those places had become clear to them, as clear as the growing military power of Hitler, and so they ran. They ran to many secluded villages in southern France, but in Le Chambon they found not only open doors to homes, but places as teachers and students in the Cevenol School as well. The number of refugees was not great at first (there are no statistics), for the school itself had only forty students, only a few of whom were refugees. The adventure of Le Chambon was barely beginning.

The box-shaped, granite temple of Le Chambon has against its west wall a high wooden pulpit from which the pastor always speaks, after having climbed a staircase to reach it. From that pulpit, Theis and Trocme preached resistance against the hatred, betrayal and naked destruction that Nazi Germany stood for. They insisted, in those times when some nations were trying to appease Hitler, that a nation, like an individual, must do all it can to resist *le mal* (evil, harm-doing). They attacked the spirit behind the “Keep America out of war” statements that were coming from across the Atlantic; they felt that while evil was being loosed upon the world, neutrality was complicity in that evil.

But their sermons had another aspect: in attacking evil, we must cherish the preciousness of all human life. Our obligation to diminish the evil in the world must begin at

home; we must not do evil, must not ourselves do harm. To be against evil is to be against the destruction of human life and against the passions that motivate that destruction.

But the sermons did not propose a neat blueprint for fighting hatred with love. They were not attempts to tell the world or Le Chambon exactly how to overcome Hitler's evil with love. In those last years of the 1930s, the sermons said: Work and look hard for ways, for opportunities to make little moves against destructiveness. The sermons did not tell what those moves should be; they said only that an imitator of Christ must somehow make such moves when the occasion arises. They were preaching an attitude of resistance and of canny, unsentimental watching for opportunities to do something in the spirit of that resistance. Those opportunities soon came.

During the last months of the war, after the Trocme's came back from their exile, Saint-Quentin was like a sprawling hospital. The smells of chemicals and of rotting flesh were everywhere and, at night, trains full of bodies from the front crossed the city to the places where the bodies were to be incinerated. With all this, the hatred of the French toward their German occupiers grew more and more bitter; but in the midst of all this, Andre Trocme began to have a fundamental, single attitude toward mankind—including the enemies of France, his mother's compatriots, the Germans.

One day, he saw coming toward him a straggling column of wounded German soldiers. The Germans were losing the war and, lacking transportation, the wounded had to drag their broken bodies step-by-step to the hospitals assigned to them. In the first row of the column, the seventeen-year-old boy saw three heavily bandaged men. The man in the middle had, instead of a head, an enormous

ball of bandages. He probably could not see, because he stumbled and was being led by his comrades. When he came closer, the boy saw that he had no lower jaw. In its place, there was a ball of linen, and from this ball there hung clots of blood.

Andre Trocme had played at war in the walled garden, and he had heard war being discussed as if it were an heroic duel of honor between good and evil, a duel in which the honor, courage and skill of one adversary sent the other down to deserved defeat. Now that the Germans were losing, this idea of war was a mania in Saint-Quentin; around him there was not only hatred for the crumbling enemy, but triumphant contempt. But he could not hate nor could he despise that man without a jaw. And, for the first time in his life, he found his hatred turning not against the enemy but against the war that had wounded that particular man so terribly. All he could think of as he looked at the blinded, stumbling monster was, "Look there, see what you have done to your brother."

A few days later, he met a German soldier on the staircase of his own house, part of which was being used as military quarters. The German stopped, looked kindly at the lad, and touched his arm. "Are you hungry?" he asked in German, and offered him a bit of Kartoffelbrot, the black potato bread of the German Army.

"No," Andre answered in German, "but even if I were hungry, I would not take bread from you because you are an enemy."

"No! No! I am not your enemy," the soldier said.

"Yes, you are," the young man persisted.

"You are my enemy. You wear that uniform and tomorrow you will perhaps kill my brother, who is a French soldier fighting against you, trying to get you Germans out of our

country. Why have you come into our country carrying war and suffering and misery?"

"I am not what you think," he answered. "I am a Christian. Do you believe in God?"

The boy's face brightened slightly - the man was using words he had often heard and uttered throughout his young life.

"At Breslau, we found Christ," the soldier went on, "and we have given Him our life." Then he told Trocme about a certain sect to which he now belonged.

The soldier said, "Men cannot hurt those who have put all their confidence in God. One day a man who hated the work of our sect came into the meeting hall to kill our leader, but his pistol misfired, and we all knew this was a sign from Heaven."

Standing there on the staircase, with his hand on the young man's arm, he went on, "I shall not kill your brother; I shall kill no Frenchman. God has revealed to us that a Christian must not kill, ever. We never carry arms."

"But how can that be?" the boy asked. "After all, you are a soldier."

"Well, I explained all this to my captain, and he has allowed me to go into battle without arms. Usually, telegraphers like me carry a pistol — or a bayonet, at least. I have nothing. I am often in danger when I am in the lines, but then I sing a hymn and I pray to God. If He has decided to keep me alive, He will. If not. . ."

Andre Trocme had met his first conscientious objector. Perhaps if the soldier had been French, the boy would have been indignant at him for refusing to defend his country when Andre's brother was out there fighting for it and for his own life. But here was a German simply refusing to do what he saw as an immoral job. The courage and faith of the man were plain, and the boy invited Kindler

(that was his name) to come to the union for the next Sunday service. Kindler accepted the invitation.

Earlier in the war, the boy had walked across Saint-Quentin with some of his German relatives, shamefacedly speaking German with them before his French compatriots. His warmhearted relatives had come to the city toward the beginning of the German occupation of Saint-Quentin to bring the Trocmes much needed food and clothing. These walks had been an agony for the patriotic young Frenchman. Now he was walking across the city at the side of a uniformed German soldier. But something was different — he was beginning to feel that every human being embodied something precious.

When they entered the bare hall of the union, his companions showed their surprise at seeing him bring a German soldier to their services. But when he explained, in the simple language of Kindler himself, that this man was a true Christian, and that he would kill no one because he obeyed Jesus Christ, they immediately adopted Kindler as one of their number, like the believing children they all were.

After the simple Protestant ceremony, Kindler gave him some papers and other private possessions and said that he had to go to the front but he would try to return to pick up his things. "If I am wounded," he said, "or if I am made prisoner, you will hear from me. If I return home, you will hear from me, too. But if you do not hear from me, send these things to my wife at the address I have written on this paper. If you do not hear from me, it is because God has judged it right to take me unto Himself."

No word ever came from Kindler. After a while, the lad sent Kindler's possessions to his family.

The attitude of nonviolence toward all human beings came to Andre Trocme from many sources: his mother's death, which showed him the horrible power of death, his friendships in the union, the sight of that poor monster of a German with a jaw of rags from which hung clots of blood, his own reading of the Sermon on the Mount, and many other experiences. But, in its depths, his nonviolence stayed as simple as Kindler's; it was an attitude toward people, not a carefully-argued theological position. In its depths, it was personal; it had to do with the persons he had known, and these persons were mainly his mother, that stumbling monster and Kindler. Years later, he would study theology in Paris and New York, and he would work to develop persuasive arguments for pacifism. But this work would be primarily for the sake of convincing others. In his own mind, nonviolence was completely expressed in words as simple and direct as Kindler's when he said to the boy, "One must refuse to shoot. Christ taught us to love our enemies. That is His good news, that we should help, not hurt each other." The German's love and courage had kindled in him a love and a courage that had been waiting for a spark to ignite them.

The story became fuller long after the Liberation in 1944. In the 1960s, Magda and Andre Trocme found themselves in Munich, where Andre was lecturing on nonviolence for the International Fellowship of Reconciliation. Knowing Major Schmebling, who had been a prisoner of war immediately after the Liberation, but who had come back to Le Puy a few years later to receive, in a formal, warmhearted ceremony, the gratitude of the people of the region for all his deeds of kindness, the Trocmes went to visit him one afternoon.

He lived in a house still partially gutted by bombs. They rang his bell and, after a slight

hesitation, he recognized them. "Ach! Pastor Trocme!" he said. "Naturally! Come in!"

After a while, Trocme said, "I am here to ask you two questions, Herr Schmebling. The first is: You knew that Le Chambon was a nest of resistance; you knew we had Jews there, and the Maquis nearby. It is true that your German police did us harm, but why did you not send a punitive expedition to destroy the village in those last months? Surely you were doing this elsewhere in France, and in places near Le Chambon. . ."

"Monsieur Trocme," he answered, "it is difficult to answer that question. You know that we had in the department of Haute Loire the Tartar Legion under SS Colonel Metzger."

Trocme knew of the man who had been the prosecuting attorney in Le Forestier's trial, and who had been executed for war crimes after the Liberation. "Well," Schmebling went on, "Colonel Metzger was a hard one, and he kept insisting that we move in on Le Chambon. But I kept telling him to wait. At his trial, I had heard the words of Dr. Le Forestier, who was a Christian and who had explained to me very clearly why you were all disobeying our orders in Le Chambon. I believed that your doctor was sincere. I am a good Catholic, you understand, and I can grasp these things."

Schmebling went on, "I told Metzger that this kind of resistance had nothing to do with violence, nothing to do with anything we could destroy with violence. With all my personal and military power, I opposed sending his legion into Le Chambon."

Nonviolent Weapons of the Spirit

By Colman McCarthy

In courses on nonviolence that I've been teaching for the past seven years in high schools and colleges, no question arises more frequently than this: Nonviolence is fine as an abstract intellectual system, but do you seriously believe it would have succeeded in the real world against the Nazis?

The question — usually thrown up as a statement wanting to end the discussion, not broaden it — is currently being answered in a low-budget film, now playing at the Key in Georgetown, that is making its modestly advertised way across the country. **Weapons of the Spirit**, written, directed and produced by Pierre Sauvage, tells the story of Le Chambon, a farming village in central France that nonviolently defied the German Army in the occupation during World War II.

The film — in understated narrative and with simple photography — presents surviving villagers whose fearlessness and quality of love in the early 1940s led them to harbor 5,000 Jewish refugees.

Other villages hid Jews, but they were few and did so only reluctantly. Le Chambon deliberately sought refugees by putting out the word that all were welcome. The Chambonnais were Huguenots—Protestants in a Catholic country who had not forgotten centuries of persecution.

Le Chambon was unique for another reason: It did not adopt pacifism as a strategy the day the Gestapo swept into town. Citizens had embraced it as a way of life years before. Saving Jewish refugees was the external fulfillment of the internal commitment to peace through the strength of nonviolence.

In their defiance of Nazis, the villagers,

most of them peasants, were led by their pacifist minister, Andre Trocme. When France surrendered to Germany, he called on his people to resist Nazis with “weapons of the spirit.”

Trocme and his family came to Le Chambon in 1934 — Part of his ministry was establishing a parish-supported school where the study of nonviolence and pacifism was emphasized. When the Nazis came, the town had a choice for self-defense: violent or nonviolent. It could choose the superior one of nonviolence because it was educated by the pastor in the theories and techniques.

In **Weapons of the Spirit**, villagers, now in their seventies and eighties, recall their nonviolent resistance and harboring of refugees as exercises in common decency, not uncommon valor. What is life for, they had been taught to wonder, if not to risk for others? What is peacemaking for, if not to do it at the moment of crisis. Anyone can be a pacifist between wars.

Two years after Trocme's death in 1971, some of his essays were collected in **Jesus and the Nonviolent Revolution**. The writing is as virile as anything found in Gandhi or Martin Luther King Jr. when they wrote of nonviolence. Trocme addressed the question of how to stop the world's Hitlers:

“People say, ‘ Our nation is about to be exterminated; or the future of our civilization, of our moral values, of true religion, is threatened; or yet, our institutions violate human rights to save human rights, we must temporarily forget our scruples and use violence, sacrificing men to destroy unjust structures, and thus saving the poor from oppression.’ For centuries both progressive and reactionary camps have been

‘temporarily’ choosing violence, ‘temporarily’ shedding the blood of millions of victims in the name of a better future. Because each side speculates about ‘what would happen if we let the enemy win,’ they mercilessly sacrifice man, whether friend or enemy. .And every generation is faced with new options time after time considered to be so important that it repeatedly believes itself compelled to use violence.”

In addition to *Weapons of the Spirit*, the story of Trocme and Le Chambon is told in *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed* by Philip Hallie. In the 1979 book, Hallie, a professor at Wesleyan University, captures the soul of the pastor much as Pierre Sauvage’s film reveals the iron of the villagers: Trocme “believed that decent people who stay inactive out of cowardice or indifference when around them human beings are being humiliated and destroyed are the most dangerous people in the world. His nonviolence was not passive or saccharine, but an almost brutal force for awakening human beings.”

After World War II, the historian and military strategist B.H. Liddell Hart interviewed German generals on the different kinds of resistance they met in occupied countries. As practiced in Denmark, Norway, Holland and such places as Le Chambon, nonviolent resistance was effective. The Nazis, Hart writes, had an “inability to cope with it. They were experts in violence, and had been trained to deal with opponents who used that method. But other forms of resistance baffled them... It was a relief to them when resistance became violent.”

By defending themselves with love, the strongest weapon of the spirit, the Chambonnais gave the Nazis no relief.

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