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# Auvergne (France): Welcoming refugees then and now - WWII and the spirit of solidarity, a living memory in the region

My personal historical research finds current resonance

Saturday 10 October 2015, by [WEISS Suzanne](#) (Date first published: 9 October 2015).

**In September I accompanied Suzanne Weiss on a research trip concerning the work of anti-Nazi resistance in France 1940-45 to save Jewish children. Suzanne's work took an unexpected turn, becoming part of present debate on attitudes to refugees. Here is her report. — John Riddell**

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Toronto, 1 October 2015: Last month I visited Auvergne, a farming region in central France where, as a Jewish child of two, I was protected from the Nazis by a peasant family. It was the third time I had gone there with John Riddell, my husband, to find out where and how I had been saved from the Holocaust.

To my surprise, this time reporters sought me out for interviews to learn my story. How am I connected to Auvergne? Why was I interviewing villagers? Why did I seek the place where I had been hidden?

Altogether five interviews were published in some form. A common thread ran through their accounts, well expressed by Simon Henry, writing for the French daily *Le Figaro*, by a quotation from the Auvergne poet J.-B. Massilon: "For each of us, the past must be a constant teacher."

My interviewers, all young and intellectually free spirits, were clearly attracted to the history of courage and love expressed by individuals and whole communities in Auvergne and elsewhere who hid refugees, mostly in plain sight, during the brutal Nazi occupation of France (1940-45).

Here is how they told my story.

## A personal quest

Alexander Pauze of *La Tribune Le Progrès* drove two hours to Le Chambon-sur-Lignon (Haute-Loire) to meet me. His article is headlined, "She seeks the village in Auvergne that took her in during the war."

Pauze wrote that "Suzanne was born in Paris in January 1941. Her father was a Jewish Ukrainian, a house painter. Her mother, a Jew from Poland, a seamstress, was arrested by the police at the post office as she was sending a package to her husband, a French soldier. She was sent to Camp Drancy and then to Auschwitz, from which she never returned."

Sandrine Morin took the same long road from Saint-Étienne to interview me for Radio France Bleu Pays d'Auvergne. She noted that "between 1943 and 1945 Suzanne was ... sheltered in Auvergne in a village whose name she doesn't remember. She was later adopted at the age of nine by an American family that would not discuss her past."

Yann Boysson, newly posted by the Auvergne daily *La Montagne* to Saint-Flour (Cantal), recounted how "Suzanne, encouraged by her husband John Riddell, returned to France in 1986 and, after some detective work, located her former guardian, Michel Buchner, and his family. Buchner told her of her mother and father. Suzanne's distant past took shape but a question mark remained: in what village had she been hidden?... She went to Auvergne in 2011, but her research bore no fruit."

Boysson highlighted the message that I repeated to all I encountered: "Important for Suzanne," he wrote, "is that she wants to thank the people of Auvergne who saved her life and that of thousands of others."

Morin's audience heard me say; "Today, the Syrians and the Iraqis are experiencing something similar to what I faced then.... We need the spirit of those times - of solidarity and humanity - to face today's challenges."

## Land of refuge

Amid these unexpected interviews, John and I pursued our research. We made our way by car through the Vivarais mountains, driving down what seemed endless narrow, twisty roads, overlooking the valleys and gorges. We arrived at the tiny hamlet of Les Ruches (Ardèche), where we lodged in a handsome old stone farmhouse with an attached barn - perhaps similar to the one where I was hidden long ago?

The next day we visited a museum in nearby Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, the Lieu de Mémoire, which focuses on the rescue in this region of thousands of Jewish people from Nazi slaughter during World War 2. We discussed the conditions faced by Jewish children with museum historian Floriane Barbier.

The entire community, she explained, helped in different ways to protect the fugitive children. "Hidden children took part in community life, going to school, celebrating Christmas, and in other activities. They were not hidden in the attic or cellars!"

People never said, "They are Jews," Barbier added. But it was obvious that something was up. "There were so many people in Chambon! So many strange accents!"

Local police officers often looked the other way. When the higher-ups in the viciously pro-Nazi Vichy

administration ordered a raid, word often leaked out in advance.

“There was a group of German soldiers in Le Chambon being treated for wounds. They told local people that they knew there were Jews here, but they did not tell their officers.” Indeed, although there were arrests and some tragic killings, the vast majority of Jews in Auvergne escaped.

I asked why the people of whole villages refused to carry out the anti-Jewish edicts of the French government. Was it because of the region’s predominantly Protestant population, as I had read?

“Protestants had lived in persecution,” replied the talented young historian. “They knew what it meant, and that was an initial explanation for their response. But the Catholic families did the very same thing.... They all shared Christian values of humanity. And the secular folk helped too.” Chambon became a village of children, of whom one-quarter were Jewish.

However, “Those seeking shelter included not only Jews but Alsatians, Catalonians, and young French men who refused to go for forced labour in Germany,” she said. And in addition, the Roma, unionists, left-wing politicals, and of course, the maquis (anti-Nazi guerrillas).

We left the well-appointed museum regretting, however, that its focus on the past didn’t make the obvious connection to today’s similar challenges of providing refuge.

We crossed the street to the Protestant Temple de l’Eglise Unie. Engraved in stone over the door is the church motto: “Aimez-vous les uns les autres” (love one another). We were met by Pastor Andreas Braun, a tall young man with long flaxen hair. “The tradition of giving refuge continues today,” he said, speaking of his congregation’s aid to refugees seeking asylum. “We are told ‘you must obey.’ Agreed, but obey what? We have a choice: to obey the laws of man or obey God, and we act accordingly.”

### **Aiding refugees then and now**

John and I met with six members of La CIMADE at a local pub in Le Chambon, where we lunched with traditional cuisine. La CIMADE helped to organize the aid to Jewish and other refugees in Chambon in the teeth of Nazi occupation. As a national social welfare organization with ties to the Protestant church, it continues to assist refugees up to the present. Our discussion was rich with lessons from their organization’s 75-year past and their response to today’s challenges. CIMADE’s goal is “to provide legal aid to those seeking refuge today,” explained Marianne M. of the Chambon branch of the organisation.

If the government refuses them entry, help is provided “but in a different form through Plateau Asile Solidarité,” said Pierre B.

“Now we must open our frontiers to Syrians and others from the Middle East,” added Hervé R.

Leaving Les Ruches, we crossed the Margeride mountains into Cantal, where we stayed on a hillside dairy farm in Clavières. Our hostess was a dear friend from our previous visit, Josette Bourrier, who was both a witness to and a victim of the Nazi’s savage devastation of Clavières in June 1944.

John and I visited a 200-year-old farmhouse in Loubaresse, now a museum. I envisioned the family and the labourers who had lived there. My Auvergne home had been similar, I thought – perhaps it was here?

## Expert assistance

We were joined in Clavières by Martin de la Soudière, a noted French ethnologist, who served as our guide for three days.

John and I came to know Martin through his writings, which include incisive historical studies of the experience of rural Auvergne during the war. A poet at heart, he has a close feel for the village culture and a gift for evocative story-telling. Two years ago, he arranged interviews for us with villagers with knowledge of those times, driving us through the many green shades of the mountains and valleys to our appointments.

In Albepierre (Cantal) we received a suggestion from two villagers that they and other friends in France lend a hand in locating the community that had sheltered me so long ago. Martin offered to coordinate these efforts. This year, some weeks before my trip, he circulated a brief notice that I was revisiting the region and fielded the many inquiries that came in, including from regional media.

Together with Martin, we visited a Resistance veteran and his family atop Mont Mouchet. We talked to residents in Chambeyrac, from where Jean Candal of the Buchner family had watched the smoke rising when the Nazis torched Clavières in 1944.

The highlight of our days with Martin was a trip south to Florac (Lozère), in the Cévennes mountains. We visited 93-year-old Eliette D., her sister, and a local librarian. Eliette told us of the battles she had witnessed and of the refugees that people in Florac and nearby settlements sought to help. I asked why the population provided aid at considerable personal risk.

“Almost all the pastors took part in this effort,” she said. “This region had a tradition as a land of refuge. I was raised on that. ‘Love the entire world’ – it was our way of life.”

My trip did not delve into the crucial role of Jewish groups and individuals in shielding Jews from Nazi murderers, a topic that I have researched separately.

By the end of the trip, Martin, John and I had picked up a few clues useful in identifying the region in Auvergne that was my wartime home.

## Meaning for today

As I travelled through Auvergne, I wondered what it was that drew attention to me. After all, there are many thousands in France today, Jewish and non-Jewish, who were sheltered from Nazi persecution during the war. I had spoken to so many whose experience was similar to mine. Some were heartened by the story of how I had traced my wartime history was important. Some young people I met had been shielded by their family’s silence regarding this experience and felt they needed to know.

Martin addressed this question during our joint interview with *Le Figaro*. “The Suzanne I met was someone who knew absolutely nothing of her roots. I was charmed by the profundity of her quest and research and her life’s journey,” he said. “She was searching for the social reasons of her rescue.”

I was asked over and over again, why do you search for your roots in Auvergne? “I want to thank the population of Auvergne for the humanity and generosity they showed when they welcomed to their communities all those, Jews and non-Jews alike, fleeing persecution from the Nazis,” I said.

I was encouraged to meet so many people and organizations that cherish the principles of the French revolution of 1789, liberté, égalité, et fraternité, and apply them to the defense of humanity today.

This spirit of solidarity, a living memory in the region, is a point of pride that speaks to the challenges of refugee influx in France and across Europe today. Perhaps we, in Canada, should apply this lesson to the refugees seeking shelter here as well.

**Suzanne Weiss**

*With thanks to John, Martin, and all the special friends I made in Auvergne for the kindness and affection that made this trip possible-SW.*

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**P.S.**

\* "Welcoming refugees then and now". October 9, 2015:

<https://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2015/10/09/welcoming-refugees-then-and-now/>