

On *Weapons of the Spirit*

Pierre Sauvage's *Weapons of the Spirit* (1989) documentary tells an extraordinary story about the ordinary people of Le Chambon. Its events do not appear in standard historical works on the Holocaust. Even in Marrus and Paxton's *Vichy France and the Jews* (1981), they receive less than a page. Phillip Hallie's *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed* (1979) focuses on Le Chambon, but his approach tends to be idiosyncratic and theological rather than historical and psychological.

Director Pierre Sauvage takes us to Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, a tiny village in south-central France, thirty-seven miles from St. Etienne. During the period of the Nazi occupation of France, Le Chambon became a safety zone for both foreign and French-born Jews; it is estimated that five thousand Jews were protected, sheltered, and hidden by the approximately five thousand inhabitants of the surrounding area. While the Nazi Holocaust escalated in France, Central Europe, and Eastern Europe, the citizens of Le Chambon refused to name names, defiantly opposed all anti-Jewish policies, and valiantly resisted the Judeocide. Such active resistance was dangerous. In France, it was a time of indifference, betrayal, denunciation, and anti-Semitic excess, partly legitimized by the Nazi occupation, partly reflecting a deep thread of anti-Jewish and xenophobic sentiment in modern French history. Both the French police and the government handed Jews over to the Nazis long before they were pressured to do so. Of the 350,000 Jews living in France in 1940, 75,000 perished to Nazi genocide; many of the Jews rounded up in France went to their deaths in Auschwitz.

While statistics are cold and difficult to grasp, the film is warm, compassionate, and sensitive, avoiding sentimentality in its searching examination of resistance and its motivation.

Sauvage explores historical and psychological themes while engaging in an intensely autobiographical drama. A “Jewish baby” born in Le Chambon on March 25, 1944, Sauvage infuses the film with artistic and historical tensions that echo his own poignant search for his roots, his quest for his ethnic and human identity, his preoccupation with how he and his family survived the Final Solution. Throughout his youth and adolescence, Sauvage’s identity as a Jew was a secret. The documentary is in significant ways an antidote to secrecy. The director’s wish to celebrate the meaning of Le Chambon becomes particularly evident in a scene in which he interviews a pro-Vichyite Minister for Youth. Sauvage asks the minister some pointed questions about the origins and consequences of Vichy’s anti-Jewish policies. He replies that he did not know the fate of 20,000 Jewish deportees, adding, “Some of my best friends are Jews.” The activities of the citizens of Le Chambon stand in sharp contrast to this empty and shallow speech.

Sauvage pursues a number of hypotheses to explain the decency of the Chambonnais. To begin with, the village was predominantly Huguenot; the plain and conscientious Huguenots had a vivid memory of centuries of political and religious oppression in France, dating back to the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. Recalling their own struggle to keep faith and dignity intact, they resonated to the life and death of dilemmas of the Jewish population. Reared on the Bible, dedicated to fundamental ethical precepts like caring for their neighbors, these villagers were ready to render help, even when it meant placing themselves in grave danger. To aid those in trouble was considered a customary, everyday event; it did not require elaborate theorizing or moral justification.

Since members of the Catholic minority in Le Chambon also rescued Jews, one cannot

account for this episode in terms of Protestant religious ideology and practice. There was also a significant tradition of pacifism, conscientious objection, and militant internationalism in the town – a tradition perhaps inspired by the diffusion of Gandhian ideas in French Protestant milieus in the late 1920s and through the 1930s. The town had two centers of pacifist resistance: a school with a distinctly nonviolent curriculum, which fostered a climate of study and political solidarity, and a man, Pastor André Trocmé, a Christian pacifist who organized opposition to the state. Trocmé preached pacifism at the outbreak of World War II; he subsequently called for non-obedience to Marshal Pétain and active forms of nonviolent resistance to the Germans. Through attributing “influence” to the pastor, Sauvage argues that the “conspiracy of goodness” occurred in Le Chambon spontaneously, naturally, without coherent leadership, reflecting a broad community consensus.

Ultimately, the film raises a profound if insoluble question, namely, how to account for the decency of Le Chambon in an era dominated by the implementation of the Final Solution. We are moved by these generous acts, particularly by the villagers’ apparently unheroic, unself-conscious, unselfish ability to render service to the Jewish victims. Can individual and communitarian altruism be explained, historically and psychologically?

In watching the succession of interviews with the surviving villagers and peasants forty years after the events, the viewer is disarmed by the simplicity of faces, of dress, and of personal presentation; these proud people remain reserved and self-contained, eager to behave in ways that are dignified and not shameful. Permitting himself a bit of license at the end of the film, Sauvage wonders if Le Chambon’s refusal to collaborate actively in atrocities can be generalized

to an attitude toward life that others could emulate. But Le Chambon was unique; most other communities, including Protestant communities, did not rescue Jews. During the massive trauma of the Holocaust, Le Chambon remained a significant but unusual island of peace. Goodness and decency may be beyond historical and psychological understanding, possibly because sustained acts of sympathy and solidarity are so exceptional. It would be relatively facile to analyze the dynamics of decency by seeing it as psychopathology, to attribute acts of goodness to rescue fantasies, to identification with kind parents or caretakers, the need to be needed, or the rechanneling of hostile or aggressive urges into their opposites. But that would be cynical. And probably unjustifiable. We need more research to explicate goodness, to move us from memory to more reliable forms of knowledge. Samuel P. Oliner's book *The Altruistic Personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe*(1988) is a step in the right direction.

Sauvage's attitude of gratitude and astonishment toward the village carries its own rewards, for this is a strong film that evokes powerful emotions and compels the viewer to ask searching questions. Sauvage agrees with Albert Camus, who, perhaps not accidentally, lived in Le Chambon from 1942 to 1943 while writing *The Plague*. Its heroes, like the villagers of Le Chambon, are plain-spoken and quietly courageous; they possess an uncanny knack for grasping the basic issues: "The essential thing was to save the greatest number of persons from dying and being doomed to unending separation, and to do this there was only one resource: to fight the plague. There was nothing admirable about this attitude; it was merely logical" (Albert Camus, *The Plague*, trans. Stuart Gilbert [New York, 1948], part 2, p. 122). The director clearly understands the same logic; the logic of the struggle against plague microbes, within and without, animating the resistance of the people of Le Chambon to the Nazis.

