Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, 1995

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It took three and a half hours to drive the seventy miles from Valence to Le Chambon-sur-Lignon. The road had been a kind of torture, serpentine up through the hills at unnatural angles. French roads are by definition narrow, but this particular road could barely accommodate one midget-sized Peugeot. The fact that this road was a bus route made me doubt the sanity of French civil engineers. When the bus finally lurched to a stop on the village square, my legs felt hollow and my mouth tasted like paste. I had read that the village's remote location had contributed significantly to its extraordinary history. Standing there on the sunny square, stomach churning and knees buckling, I fully understood why the Gestapo had rarely made the trip to Le Chambon.

I sat on a bench for several minutes, taking in the first images of a place that until then had existed only in my imagination. I had known of the town for years, this tiny Protestant island in the sea of French Catholicism. I had learned of its history and the lives of its former residents from my readings on the Second World War. In college, I had taken a course on the Nazi genocide. I had written pages about the ground on which I stood and the uncommon little town that wrapped itself around the square. It was a fantastic and somewhat disconcerting coincidence that I had found a volunteer internship there in Le Chambon.

Now I was standing there, somehow expecting a magical aura to surround the place. To my great disappointment, I didn't feel anything "magical" whatsoever. I tried to invent something. I walked to the edge of the square and stared down Route de Tence, drawing historical facts and stirring memories into my mind.

This is where the buses passed through when they came for the children. André Trocmé might have voiced his refusal to give over the Jewish refugees here on this very spot, armed only with his faith and stubborn will. Maybe the officer stood right there, in his smart S.S. uniform. I can see his mouth, pressed into a tight line, his brows arched in astonishment. In the end, all his buses left, empty, along this same road. The square must have been so terribly silent. Once, some time later, a single shot was fired here on this square. See, I can imagine it all very well. . . .

I whispered these thoughts to myself and waited for a chill to creep across my flesh. It didn't work. The memory of the three thousand Jews was somewhere in my mind--I was certain of that. The images of the events were still vivid, yet I couldn't connect them to this place. In the following four months, I visited many quiet corners of Le Chambon where remarkable acts of goodness and unspeakable acts of hatred had occurred. I was never moved to tears, and I wondered if this was a fault in my own spirit. Perhaps my studies of the Holocaust as a world event had left me jaded to the tales of individual suffering? I didn't think that was possible. But then, the roads and buildings of Le Chambon were no different from those of any other town. It was the people of Le Chambon who held within themselves the incredible power to do good.

Of course, the rescuers are all but gone now. Fifty years have passed. The children of the war have grandchildren. Many of the older survivors have flocked south to the sunny villas of Provence. Magda Trocmé, the courageous wife of Pastor Trocmé, lives in Paris now, afflicted with Alzheimer's disease. She cannot remember any of the extraordinary
events of her life in Le Chambon. She is astonished when someone recounts stories of her own indomitable courage. I met many elderly Chambonnais, and each time I brushed my lips to a soft, dry cheek in greeting, I wondered, *Were you here? Did you help?*

I never spoke the questions aloud. Something in me, or in the sense of the village, forbade me to speak of the past. What pain might I dredge up? How dare I bring such suffering to mind? If there were stories to be shared, I would have to wait for them to surface on their own. My intuitive silence was valuable in its own way. It drew a mutual curiosity from the Chambonnais, leading to wonderful conversations, and it kept me from violating the law.

A long struggle with the media had eventually driven the Chambonnais to formally prohibit public discussion of the Nazi occupation period and questioning of the survivors. After Phillip Hallie’s book, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*, went to press, there was of course the rash of documentary films and television miniseries retelling the story of Le Chambon. In all, I’ve read four books, including Hallie’s, and seen six different film versions of the town’s history.

Some of these productions were filmed in and around the village. The first educational series was done with the consent and cooperation of the surviving rescuers. For the most part, however, the film and television adaptations were grossly sensationalized. Marie-Catherine, the school librarian, invited me to her house to view several of these productions on video. We watched them together, pointing out the truths and faults of each interpretation. The most disappointing version added a spectacular shoot-out between a group of young Chambonnais men and the S.S., belying the village’s actual triumph through nonviolence.

When I asked Marie-Catherine how the Chambonnais had responded to these films, she grimaced. At first, the younger generation of Chambonnais was pleased that their parents’ struggle for good was coming to light. Soon, though, the village residents came to resent the perpetual interviews and the increasingly inaccurate representations of their story. In the late 1980s, the new Protestant minister and the mayor worked to create a city ordinance that prohibited outsiders from harassing the people of Le Chambon with interviews and prodding research.

At first I thought the ordinance was a bit extreme, but I soon realized that the city was acting purely in defense of its citizens. It wasn’t that the Chambonnais were unwilling to talk, or that they were trying to forget a part of their lives. They have always been willing to share their history, provided it happens on their terms and with people who truly want to understand the events that took place so many years ago.

I think my American citizenship was a factor in my inclusion in the rare discussions of the Occupation. The Chambonnais have always had a unique relationship with Americans. One of the founders of the Cévenol School, which sheltered Jewish children, was an American. The American Quakers sent steady financial support to the rescuers of Le Chambon throughout the resistance effort. Several individual Americans helped to facilitate the flight of Jewish refugees to the United States. These long friendships have created a warm welcome for Americans staying in Le Chambon.
However, I wasn't the only American in Le Chambon. During the visit of a retired couple from Ohio, I came to understand the intent of the city ordinance. Mr. and Mrs. Schenck were devout Protestants, and Le Chambon was a sort of pilgrimage for them, a must-see attraction on their whirlwind tour of the continent. Armed with their copy of Hallie's book, they stormed the town in search of autographs. They collected pieces of Le Chambon, seeing every brick and tree as relics of the paramount example of Christian love. They attended worship in the little Protestant temple where Trocmé preached his doctrine of nonviolent resistance. They took photographs of each other, smiling beside the plaque of gratitude given to the Chambonnais by the nation of Israel. As they drove out of town in their rented Citroen, I let out a sigh of relief.

I think the Schenks found exactly what they were looking for in Le Chambon. I was still looking. I couldn't understand why Le Chambon hadn't fulfilled my expectations. How could I imagine that something had changed when I had never known the Le Chambon of the 1940s? Still, I sensed changes; some differences were apparent even to visitors like me.

Le Chambon would have been the last place on earth I'd have imagined as suffering from racial tension. The Cévenol School where I worked still professed to uphold its legacy of racial harmony and international goodwill. Yet there were frequent, violent fights between the many students of various African nationalities. The French students accused the Africans of theft and extortion. When I went to the grocery store, I noticed that the managers followed the Algerians closely and even asked one group to empty their pockets before they could leave the store. I couldn't reconcile these events with the Le Chambon that still existed in my head, the Le Chambon of mythic proportions.

Living through everyday life in Le Chambon for a few months finally reduced those myths into reality. On a Thursday morning, I was walking down the steep road to the market. I met up with an elderly man whom I didn't recognize. For a while we walked quietly side by side. Shortly, though, the older man started up a conversation in that strange way elderly people often do, immediately sharing details of the most intimate aspects of their lives.

He told me about his daughter, who was being treated for cancer in a hospital in Lyon. He was certain that they had already been through enough trials in their lives and couldn't understand why this had happened to his child. "If only she had stayed in Le Chambon," he said, "where life is slower and the air is cleaner, she might not have cancer today. But then, even Le Chambon has changed since she left. There are two supermarkets and three times as many cars, and I don't care for the new pastor." He continued commenting about the little changes in Le Chambon: the phones, the movie theater, the new pharmacy, the color of the town hall. I thought to myself: well, of course things have changed. Time goes on and someone has to repaint the town hall, and someone needs take over the church. Did he think the world would simply stop?

Then I realized what I was thinking. Of course, Le Chambon had changed. Did I think the world would simply stop? Something extraordinary took place in Le Chambon, many years ago. A unique group of people were in the right place at the right time. The sum of a hundred factors produced a wonderful conspiracy of righteousness that will never again be equaled. What had I been looking for? Those people are gone, that time has passed.
There is no comparable terror demanding a similar act of moral excellence from the people of Le Chambon. The powerful magic that was once here left with André Trocmé and his fellow conspirators.

I'll be going back to Le Chambon soon. I will never forget what happened there once. This time, though, I'm going to visit living people whom I love. I want to see the buildings that are standing there now, the children who live there now. I don't need to search for ghosts. I know there is no magic in the streets or in the houses. I will remember what happened in 1942 every time I stand on that square, but now I will have some memories of my own, as well.

Kerri Meyer  St. James Park, December

The wood ducks, with their clever eyes, left some time ago in late September. Someone has come for the old grey pelican. She forgets to leave now, so they keep her alive in the London Zoo. The black angry swan (the one that hated us all summer long—hissing and shaking at the boys who brought their fistfuls of breadcrumbs too close to the water's edge) he is here with us still, the slender black neck limp on the thin snow, the fragile grey feet imprisoned in the ice.