

Goodness Happens

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The villagers of Le Chambon liked to complain about the weather. Nine months of freezing cold, they muttered, then three months of trouble. Situated among the high peaks of southern France, the little township depended on tourists for business during the brief alpine summer. But the winter of 1940-41 was more than usually brutal, and the trouble in store would be more prolonged and more menacing than anyone could have imagined.

The previous June, Paris had fallen. The Nazis had stormed across France in less than a month, just as they had blitzkrieged and bombed their way through Belgium and Holland and Luxembourg. In the south of France, Hitler had installed a puppet government, the Vichy regime headed by an aging war hero pliable to taking orders from Berlin. Across the Pyrenees there was Franco's Spain and to the east lay Mussolini. Le Chambon was never at the center of the fighting or on the frontlines during World War Two. But it was surrounded and at the mercy of murderous foes on every side.

It was on an especially cold and blustery winter's night that the pastor's wife heard a knock on the parsonage door. Magda Trocmé and her husband Andre had occupied the old stone manse for six years and it was a close knit parish. But a thump on the old wooden door so late when the four children were already in bed was unexpected and a cause for concern. What Magda saw standing in the crooked street outside the presbytery was a thin woman draped in snow, her face as weather worn as the thin garments that failed to protect her from the elements. Magda remembered the moment many years later.

A German woman knocked at my door. It was the evening and she said she was a German Jew, coming from northern France, that she was in danger, and that she had heard that in Le Chambon somebody could help her. Could she come into my house? I said "Naturally, come in and come in."

Giving her dry clothes and seating her near the stove, Magda made her guest comfortable, learning the woman had fled the vicious racial laws of her homeland and, entering into the occupied zone where German soldiers were on patrol, crossed the demarcation line into southern France where the danger seemed less imminent. But even here, Magda quickly realized, this runaway would need more than food and shelter. She would also need papers: a passport, an identity, documents including ration cards if she expected to survive. Even now, this early in the war, there were frequent deportations, round-ups of illegals. Papers were critical.

Magda knew the mayor well, a fellow Frenchman and not a German, and believed naively that the good man might help. So that very night she paid the magistrate a visit and was surprised at the reception. "What?" he exclaimed. "Endanger the whole

village for the sake of one foreigner? How can you suggest it? Get her out of town by morning!” Magda realized then that all her actions would have to be clandestine, carried out without the knowledge but under the noses of Vichy officials. By morning, the woman was gone to another safe house in the vicinity. And that was how it began.

She was the first of hundreds to find refuge in Le Chambon. Every one would be given sanctuary, hidden out of sight of the authorities, secreted onto one of the outlying farms, and supplied with forged I.D. Not all of them were Jews. Some were Spanish Republicans who’d been defeated and driven out of places like Guernica by the fascists. Some were German citizens who were anti-Nazi, seeking to avoid military mobilization into Hitler’s *wehrmacht*, or young Frenchmen afraid of being drafted as forced labor into Germany’s industrial war machine. But the vast majority of the refugees were Jews and, of those, most were children.

Magda’s husband Andre was a man of learning, who’d even traveled to Union Theological Seminary in New York in his studies for ministry. And one of his first projects on arriving in the parish was to establish a school. What he envisioned was an international academy that would not only prepare young people for university but foster a spirit of cross-cultural cooperation among the students while at the same time bringing a smattering of intellectualism to what was really a sleepy and parochial hamlet. Though small, the school would turn out to be the perfect setting for hiding youngsters, of whom there were many. The Germans were busily separating families. Fathers were the first to be sent away, then the mothers. At this point, Jews and other undesirables were being herded into what were technically work camps, not yet death camps. Nonetheless, parents were separated from children. Working in Marseilles, the American Friends Service Committee was able to supply some of the adults with medical certificates exempting them from hard labor, but when they failed, the Quakers sent many of the lost and abandoned children to Andre Trocmé.

Though he was well-educated, Trocmé was naturally a man of action. The gospel for him was not just a text to be studied but a calling to be lived out. As a French Protestant, Trocmé belonged to a tiny religious minority, outnumbered a hundred to one in a nation of Roman Catholics and enduring centuries of persecution for the sake of moral conscience. For Huguenots, that still, small voice was not to be taken lightly or ignored. Christianity was not a matter of convenience or convention but a path of complete and total commitment. And for Andre Trocmé that commitment was less to any doctrine or formal creed than to one’s fellow human beings, of whatever religion or race or nationality. When he saw suffering, it was his duty to intervene. And as an ardent pacifist who believed that following Jesus meant forgiving one’s enemies, not retaliation or revenge, aiding the needy had to be done without violence or harm to others.

Passive resistance started in small ways, like refusing to give the “seig heil” salute at a flag raising ceremony. The non-cooperation intensified. A police lieutenant, handsome in his new Vichy uniform, just happened to walk across a number of rotten planks hiding the cesspool on a farm that was being searched for human contraband. Apparently, no

one thought to warn him not to cross those boards. As the round-ups and dragnets continued, the inhabitants of the little village began to gather pluck. Asked about any Jews hiding in the vicinity, they were apt to reply, "What would Jews be doing here? Have you seen any? They say they have funny noses!" The amazing truth is that over the course of four years, from occupation to liberation, there were no betrayals. No one broke, despite the fact that nearly everyone in this village of three thousand had more than an inkling of the truth. Trocmé had organized his parish in such a way that if there were a breach, no single individual had all the information. But it wasn't necessary. The rescuers were tight-lipped, despite the risks and dangers they all ran. They were amateurs in every sense. They had not been trained in counter-espionage or guerilla tactics or any of the arts of war. They were making it all up as they went along. And they were amateurs because their motivations were purely personal rather than professional. They were acting out of love, conviction, character and a passion for the right.

Not all of them were religious in the ordinary sense. Even Magda, the pastor's wife, disavowed any higher or spiritual motivations. "I have a kind of principle," she said.

I am not a good Christian at all, but I have things that I really believe in. First of all, I believe and believed in Andre Trocmé. I was faithful to his projects and to him personally, and I understood him very well. Second principle: I try not to hunt around to find things to do. I do not hunt around to find people to help. But I never close my door, never refuse to help somebody who comes to me and asks for something. This I think is my kind of religion. You see, it is a way of handling myself. When things happen, not things that I plan, but things sent by God, or by chance, when people come to my door, I feel responsible. During Andre's life and during the war, many many people came, and my life was therefore complicated.

Life can indeed be complicated. But for Magda Trocmé, the complications were not about right and wrong, or whether pacifism or just war theory might be a better ethical framework, or whether non-violence can have real efficacy against Panzer divisions or totalitarian systems. Those kinds of questions came later to the author who researched and told her story, Philip Hallie, a professor of ethics at Wesleyan University who spent years interviewing the occupants of Le Chambon to recover the almost forgotten history of their exploits. In his book *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*, Hallie compared Le Chambon to the fabled "cities of refuge" mentioned in the Hebrew Bible. In Deuteronomy, the inhabitants of such a city have a solemn duty to protect the wayfarer who comes seeking protection. Those inside the city gates are guarded from all harm.

But shortly after his book was published in 1979, he began to receive critical letters pointing out that no one really fought at Le Chambon. The whole history of World War Two could be written without even mentioning such a minor backwater as that. Having served himself in uniform during the great conflict, Hallie took the complaints to heart. He was an artilleryman and knew what veterans had sacrificed. After all, it took an allied army to finally defeat Hitler. Hallie wondered. Was he wrong to spotlight the

Trocme's and their townsfolk? Perhaps, he confessed, "the story of a few nonviolent eccentrics who did nothing to stop armed forces mattered only to a few mushy-minded moralists like me."

But of course it did matter to others. It mattered, for instance, to Eric Schwam, who died last year on Christmas Day, December 25th, at the age of ninety, but who had been sheltered and hidden with his family in the local school by the villagers of Le Chambon. Arriving as a child in 1943, Mr. Schwam lived there until 1950. He eventually studied pharmacy and married a Catholic woman. On his death, he left a surprise bequest of two million Euros to the school: a Christmas present from a Jew to Protestants who never thought of themselves as heroic or especially courageous or worthy of special mention.

As Hallie points out, there are no saints in Protestantism, and the people of Le Chambon never considered themselves such. Nor were they academics or armchair generals with the luxury of time to ponder a perfect course of action. They could not afford to speculate or hypothesize how their deeds would ring down the corridors of history. They were in the midst of crisis. Faced with the human reality of neighbors in immediate need who were shivering with fear and cold, they followed the teaching of the Good Samaritan, some with confident faith that God would do the rest, others because (regardless of the outcome) it seemed the only decent thing to do.

The latter would describe the philosophy of Albert Camus, who spent almost a year living near Le Chambon during 1942, where he began writing his famous novel *The Plague*. In a testament to the underground nature of Trocme's invisible network, Camus never suspected that he was living in a nest of refugees and secret rescuers. But the hero of Camus' novel bore an uncanny resemblance to the Protestant pastor. Both are totally committed to saving lives. Though fighting different enemies, both see the real nature of the plague as indifference or nonchalance toward killing on a mass scale. Asked why he stays in the infected city to fight the microbes who are so casual about quenching out human life, Dr. Rieux answers, "I just never got used to watching people die." That same intolerance for merely watching or standing by while others perished could describe Andre Trocme.

This Christmas as we remember the old tale of the teenage mother, the father with few skills, the child with no crib, let us recall that this is also our story. We should not get used to hearing it, never, just as we should never get used to watching others struggle simply to stay safe and warm. If the holy family is to find room at the inn this winter, it will be up to us to open the doors of our hearts and homes and, like Magda Trocme, exclaim to the stranger "Come in, and come in!"