

**Jump TO Article**



The article on the pages below is reprinted by permission from *United Service* (the journal of the Royal United Services Institute of New South Wales), which seeks to inform the defence and security debate in Australia and to bring an Australian perspective to that debate internationally.

The Royal United Services Institute of New South Wales (RUSI NSW) has been promoting informed debate on defence and security issues since 1888. To receive quarterly copies of *United Service* and to obtain other significant benefits of RUSI NSW membership, please see our online Membership page:

[www.rusinsw.org.au/Membership](http://www.rusinsw.org.au/Membership)



**Jump TO Article**

# ***Le Chambon-sur-Lignon: a Jewish refuge in World War II France***

the editor's summary of a presentation to the Institute on 24 February 2015 by

**Mr Peter Grose**

Journalist, Literary Agent, Publisher and Author<sup>1</sup>



*Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, a remote mountain village with Huguenot and pacifist sympathies near France's border with Switzerland, served as a safe haven for some 3500 Jews and 1500 other refugees in France in World War II. As the war progressed, two overland escape routes were developed from the village to Switzerland and were operated by sympathetic villagers, often with Boy Scouts as guides. In addition to the rescue operation, an armed Resistance formed as liberation became an increasing possibility*

**Key words:** Le Chambon-sur-Lignon; France; World War II; Jews; Huguenots; pacifists; Resistance.

Le Chambon-sur-Lignon is a small village in south-east France, some 600 km from Paris. It is located on a high plateau in the French Alps (Haute-Loire department) near the Swiss border, not far from Lyon or Geneva. The residents have been primarily Huguenot (French Protestants inspired by John Calvin's writings) since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. During World War II, the 5000 residents of the village and surrounding communes made the plateau a haven for Jews and others fleeing from the Nazi occupiers. They both hid them within the town and countryside, and helped them flee to neutral Switzerland. This is their story.

## **Pre-War Chambon**

Before World War II, Le Chambon was an isolated village on a remote mountain plateau. It was not near any strategic route and had been left alone by successive waves of invaders of the Rhône valley for some two millennia. Its only industry was pastoralism – some 10,000 cows. Its citizens were principally descendants of Huguenots and other Protestants. While no longer persecuted themselves, they sympathised with other minorities who were persecuted.

Le Chambon's isolation had ended when a single-track railway arrived in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The railway had opened the plateau up for tourism and it became recognised as a healthy holiday venue, especially for children, who were provided with lodging in the village and on farms around the plateau. The citizens became used to having strangers staying with them.

In 1934, Le Chambon acquired a new Protestant pastor, Andre Trocmé, who had been a teenager in

Saint Quentin on the Somme during the Great War and, as a result of his wartime experiences<sup>2</sup>, had become a pacifist. When they arrived in Le Chambon, Trocmé and his assistant, Eduoard Theis, constituted a pacifist minority of two. The Protestant Reformed Church did not support the pacifist position, so Trocmé's appointment was as a temporary pastor. Nevertheless, with its history of supporting the persecuted, the pacifist position gained a foothold in the village under Trocmé's strong leadership and influence.

In 1938, a Jewish female refugee fled Austria and somehow ended up in Le Chambon. She was received kindly and was accepted into the village. It seems that the word got out and thereafter a tiny trickle of Jews began arriving in Le Chambon to a generous reception. They were hidden from the authorities and given shelter, forged identities, ration cards, and education for the children.

## **Turning Point 1: The 1940 German Invasion of France**

The first turning point for Le Chambon during World War II came with the German invasion of France and the Low Countries which began on 10 May 1940. France was divided into two zones: a German occupied zone across the north and down the Atlantic coast; and a zone governed by French collaborators from the town of Vichy in the south (the Free Zone). Harsh anti-Jewish legislation was enacted in both zones.

Internment camps for the vast numbers of foreign Jews, enemy aliens and other 'undesirables' sprang up along Mediterranean coast, in the Free Zone. Trocmé was sent by his parish to liaise between the parish and the camps and to assist the internees. The Chambonnaise had in mind sending food and other supplies, but Trocmé was told by Quakers based in Marseille that Le Chambon could be of more assistance if it would accept refugees instead. The Chambonnaise agreed and homes and hostels were set up in Le Chambon and

<sup>1</sup>This paper is based on Grose (2014). E-mail: petergrose@me.com.

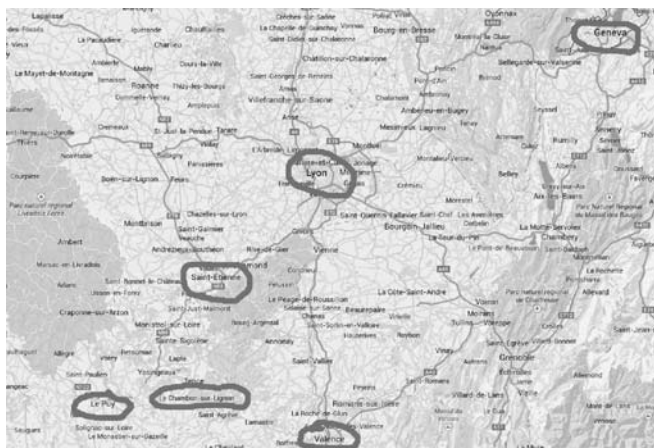
<sup>2</sup>He had observed the death and destruction occasioned by the warfare which engulfed the town for four years. His mother had been killed, which placed great pressure on the surviving family. He had been influenced by a German soldier who was a pacifist. He decided that he could never support the killing of another human being.

the surrounding countryside to accept the refugees. Soon a trickle of refugees became a stream, dominated by children, predominantly Jewish. Also given refuge in Le Chambon were quite a number of French citizens who were dodging their obligations to work in German factories under the forced-labour laws.

This, however, was dangerous work. A person would be in very serious trouble if caught harbouring foreign Jewish refugees. Pastor Trocmé by now had become the dominant voice in village, his pacifist views predominating, and so the work continued. Fortunately, the Gendarmes tended to take a reasonably lenient approach to law enforcement in the Free Zone at this stage of the war.



France as occupied by the Axis Powers between 1940 and 1944 [Source: Wikipedia Commons]



The French Alps, showing the position of Le Chambon in relation to the towns mentioned in this paper – Lyon, Geneva, Valence, Saint-Étienne, and Le Puy-en-Velay [Source: Google Maps]

### Turning Point 2: The 1942 Allied Invasion of French North Africa

A second turning point in the War came with the British-American invasion of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia, Operation Torch, which began on 8 November

1942. Suddenly, it started to appear possible that the Germans just might lose the war. The Germans became concerned about a possible Allied invasion of southern France across the Mediterranean from Algeria. German control spread to the Free (Vichy) Zone, which was renamed the Southern Zone – this was a sign of German weakness not strength – and the Italians occupied south-east France (which became Italy's Savoy Province).

With this rising sense that the Germans could be thrown out, the Resistance was established in Le Chambon in early 1943. Pacifism started to lose favour and tension developed between the pacifists and the Resistance. After mid-1943, armed resistance slowly took over. The Resistance began arming people, but in the split between pacifist pastor and the Resistance, the latter took care not to jeopardise the refugee work, which continued to the end of the war.

Two escape routes were developed from Le Chambon to Switzerland: one by rail via Lyon, thence north-east to Geneva (the northern route); the other initially to the south-east for 74 km on foot, thence by road north to Switzerland (the southern route). Both routes were operated by the villagers, in the case of the southern one, by teenage Boy Scouts in uniform, guiding escapees also dressed as scouts, and all purporting to be on an overland hike to Valence. Increasing numbers of refugees were moved along these two routes, but, as some departed Le Chambon, new refugees would arrive to take their place.

### Turning Point 3: The 1944 Allied Invasion of France

The third turning point in the War came with Operation Overlord, the Allied invasion of Normandy which began on 6 June 1944. In Le Chambon, the tension between pacifism and armed resistance to the Germans remained, but the pendulum now swung definitively towards armed resistance. Pastor Trocmé had already been arrested once, but had managed to talk his way out of imprisonment. If he were arrested again there would be an uprising in Le Chambon, so to avoid bloodshed he went into hiding.

During this phase, the Gendarmes enforced law with an ever lighter touch. The Resistance in Le Chambon stepped up its operations against German supply lines, while the two escape routes to Switzerland continued to operate despite these more dangerous conditions.

The Allies inserted Virginia Hall<sup>3</sup>, an American spy, into Le Chambon to be their liaison officer with the Resistance on the plateau. Equipped with a radio, once

<sup>3</sup>Hall, who had a wooden leg, had been a spy in Lyon in 1943 and had been responsible for organising a Resistance cell, selecting parachute landing sites, and developing and managing escape routes for Allied airmen. She was forced to escape from Lyon through Spain by one such route herself in November 1943, battling deep snow as she climbed the Pyrenees on her wooden leg to a height of some 3000m. To return to France in 1944, she had to be inserted by sea as her wooden leg prevented parachute insertion.

she was satisfied as to the Resistance's *bona fides*, she arranged the arming, equipping and financing of the local Resistance. Parachute sites were selected for resupply and slowly Browning machine-guns, mortars, grenades, anti-tank weapons, and demolition gear began arriving, in addition to small arms and small-arm ammunition.

Hall was able to coordinate the activities of the Resistance with that of the advancing Allied armies, especially after 15 August 1944 when a Free French army landed on the French south coast and gathered in the Resistance as it advanced north forming them into the FFI (French Forces of the Interior), light infantry units employed in support of the Free French Army during the liberation phase from August to October 1944.

The Le Chambon Resistance hassled the Germans ahead of the advancing Free French and FFI forces. German supply routes were cut, including importantly the single-track railway line linking the large and important city of Lyon to the Haute-Loire departmental capital of Le Puy-en-Velay, via the industrial city of Saint-Étienne. This line continued south to the Mediterranean and could have been used by the Germans to move reinforcements forward to oppose the Allies now establishing themselves on the European mainland. The resistance demolished a key bridge on the line as a train was crossing it, dropping the train and the bridge into the ravine below.

### **Conclusion**

With liberation in September 1944, the refugee work and armed resistance in Le Chambon ended. Le Chambon had given some 3500 Jews, plus another 1500 Resistance members, labour-law draft dodgers, and other refugees from German occupation, predominantly Jewish children and youth, a safe haven

during World War II. It also assisted many of them to escape to Switzerland. Armed resistance, increasing as the War progressed, also impeded the German occupiers and assisted the Allied advance in 1944.

This raises the question: did pacifism succeed or fail in Le Chambon? In the early days of the Occupation, it undoubtedly provided a useful cover for the emerging Resistance. The authorities paid the plateau no particular attention, happily accepting that pacifism held sway there, and that it therefore presented no threat. So pacifism was initially successful in protecting both villagers and refugees from the worst excesses of the Vichy government and the German occupation. But it could not drive the Germans out, and eventually it had to make way for armed resistance as liberation became more and more likely.

**The Author:** Peter Grose began his working life as a journalist in the 1960s in Sydney and then London. In 1968, he started a literary agency, Curtis Brown Australia; and then became involved in book publishing with Martin Secker & Warburg in London in the 1970s. From 1998 to 2005, he was chairman of Australian Consolidated Press (UK). His first book, *A Very Rude Awakening* (Allen & Unwin, 2007), told the story of the Japanese midget submarine raid on Sydney Harbour in May 1942. His second book, *An Awkward Truth* (Allen & Unwin, 2009), dealt with the Japanese bombing raid on Darwin in February 1942. His latest book, *The Greatest Escape* (UK and European title) or *A Good Place to Hide* (USA and Australia), is summarised in this paper. [Photo of Peter Grose: the author]

### **Reference**

Grose, Peter (2014). *A good place to hide: how one French community saved thousands of lives in World War II* (Allen & Unwin: Sydney).