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Institute of Current World Affairs

The Crane-Rogers Foundation
Four West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755 U.S.A.

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Jean Benoît Nadeau is a Fellow of the Institute studying "the resistance of the French to the trend of economic and cultural globalization."

War Time Memories Part 2: Collaboration and Resistance

PARIS, France

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By Jean Benoît Nadeau

Ever since the official commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Liberation, in 1994, Jean-Marie Bressand, 80, grinds his teeth every time he hears that people joined the French Resistance upon hearing General Charles de Gaulle's famous speech on the BBC on June 18, 1940. "Nobody ever entered the Resistance at de Gaulle's call, because no one ever heard him on the radio!" says Bressand, who became one of the best sources on the German army in the period of 1941-1943 — code-named "Casino."

"The true, effective Resistance was a spontaneous and disorganized affair," he says, "and its history has never been written because historians trust documents and don't like speaking to actors or spectators."

It was by chance that I came across Jean-Marie in his hometown of Besançon, near the Swiss border. He runs *Le Monde Bilingue* / The Bilingual World, an organization devoted to teaching languages by immersion. I was visiting him to discuss second-language teaching in France and Europe. We did talk about this, but I soon realized that I had in front of me not only a war hero who had fought Nazism in his early manhood, but also someone who battled narrow-mindedness throughout his life. France and Europe never applied his ideas of language-immersion schools (but Canada did) and they never liked his ideas of twinning European cities with non-European cities. But his lifelong efforts nearly won him the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1983. "There are a lot of objections to bringing people closer," says Jean-Marie, who is blamed left and right for his lack of conformism, a necessary requirement to become a early leader of the Resistance.

France's involvement in World War II is an opaque question indeed, because people said one thing but did another, good or bad, in the Resistance, in the collaboration, on the black market. France collaborated, France resisted, and France waited — all at once. Whereas World War I had been a great unifying experience for the French, World War II was 40 million private wars.

It is not by chance that this newsletter on wartime collaboration and Resistance is distinct from the previous one on the persecution of Jews: they are not the same. Thinking in categories, we tend to equate anti-Semitism with fascism, with Nazism, with collaboration — somewhat falsely. Consider Xavier Vallat, who headed the *Commissariat général aux questions juives* (Ministry of Jewish Affairs) in 1940-42. He was a passionate anti-Semite, but also passionately anti-German, which is why he lost his job. His boss, Prime Minister Pierre Laval (1940, 1942-1944) had himself been a Pacifist who took the defeat of 1940 as a matter settled once and for all. But he belonged to a category of Socialists that loathed the Bolsheviks to the point of preaching open collaboration with Germany.

In the end, what matters is what people did — or did not do. Semantic nu-



Jean-Marie Bressand at home. Under the war name of Casino, he earned himself half a dozen decorations for supplying the Allies with high-quality intelligence on the German army. This lasted until the Gestapo dismantled the network in 1943. He was questioned and later escaped.

ances do not excuse immoral behavior, they simply help explain personal choices — which is partly what history is all about. For instance, a label would never explain Jean-Marie's choice. I realized this on our second encounter when he admitted one uneasy truth: in 1937, at age 17, he had fought in the Spanish Civil War as a *légionnaire* of Franco against the Communist and the Republicans! By such standard, you would have expected Jean-Marie to seize the day at the defeat of France in 1940, and become a fascist, a collaborationist, an anti-Semite. He did just the opposite. "I'm not too proud of having fought for Franco," says Jean-Marie. "But then, I hope I made up for it."

* * *

You needn't be surprised that Jean-Marie went off to battle for Franco in 1937. The 17th child of 19, he was raised in a rigorously Catholic family, attending two masses a day. He grew up in fear of Communism. So when the Civil War broke out in Spain, Jean-Marie thought it was a good idea to bash some Republicans. The fact that he actually went owes to his temper: his mother had nicknamed him *l'Intrépide* as a youngster because he was fearless and never did as the others did. Jean-Marie's Crusade lasted nine months. "I had joined the wrong camp. I was with bandits. Those hand-raising salutes, the goose step, the Nazi doctrine, the weird cross, none of this was Christian."

He returned to finish his university degree, and was

an officer cadet in the artillery school of Fontainebleau when the French army was routed in June of 1940. Jean-Marie, like most Frenchmen, heard the call to surrender from the new head of state, *Maréchal* Philippe Pétain (1940-44). Jean-Marie resumed his training as officer, but called it quits when he saw his mates marching in goose step and heard training officers praising Nazi discipline. He ran home.

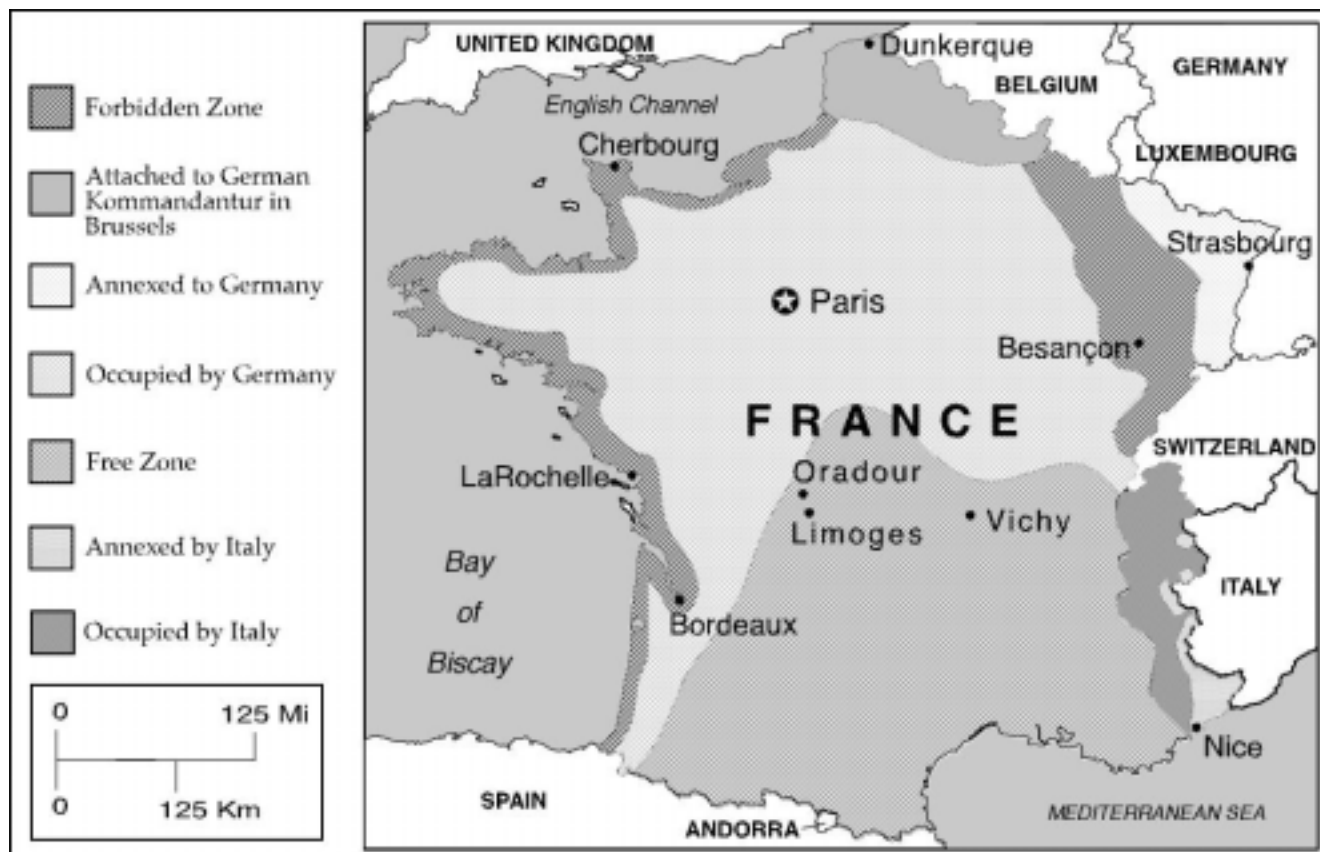
Jean-Marie's idea was to do "whatever against the Germans" — the term "Resistance" did not even exist then. But there was no recruiting office; everything had to be done from scratch. He rallied a group of college friends. He got himself a job at the local cinema, the Casino, and because the owner was also a patriot, she gave him a back room with permission to use it as a base to carry underground activities.

For that matter, Besançon was a good place to be, since there were many Germans in the neighborhood to resist against. Located near the German and Swiss borders, and close to the no-man's land that divided occupied and non-occupied France, the town of 50,000 had become an important hub. Battle-weary German divisions were usually stationed there for rehabilitation and rest. The Casino Theater, next to a thermal bath and a restaurant, became the German army's official fun resort. And Jean-Marie, as *Direktor von Soldatenkino* (Director of the Soldier's cinema), had an obligation to find the best supplies of sweets for the soldiers. So he was given all proper papers to move freely across the no-man's land when necessary...

The tough part as an early member of the Resistance was figuring out what to do. Jean-Marie's group collected information on the German army, mostly by reading soldiers' badges, but also bullied well-known local collaborators. Since soldiers make good customers, people usually welcomed the Germans. The code term of appreciation was, "*Ces messieurs sont corrects* (They are decent gentlemen)." One dark night in April 1941, Jean-Marie rode out on his bicycle and threw a stone through the window of a bookseller displaying Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. The next day, the stone was displayed in the window with the note: "Sent by Moscow."

Jean-Marie soon became frustrated by such amateurish beginnings. For lack of experience and contacts, his efforts at intelligence were going nowhere. "I found we could not simply drop information at the British and American consulates in the Free Zone!" For the purpose of establishing liaison with London, Jean-Marie even went to Marseilles in the hope of boarding a ship to Algiers. This scheme did not pan out, either. But as he returned home, someone introduced him to somebody, who spoke to someone else, who sat him in front of an Alsatian French army intelligence officer, *capitaine* Louis Kleinmann — code name "Kaiser."

This was a very serious contact: Kaiser belonged to



the 2nd bureau of the French army's General Staff, in Lyon. Although a part of the collaborationist regime's official army, the 2nd bureau was in fact a front for a clandestine network supplying information to the British. Kaiser wanted someone in Besançon, and a committed *Direktor von Soldatenkino* could go a long way toward fulfilling the need. Kaiser became Jean-Marie's mentor, and Jean-Marie agreed to create a smaller, more professional cell that would not indulge in throwing stones through windows, but would concentrate on strict intelligence and infiltration.

From then on, most of Jean-Marie's resistance work consisted of finding out what information was needed, how to get it, and how to relay it to Kaiser. It began with a few classic tactics: emptying garbage bins, watching the movements of trains, emptying officers' pockets in cloakrooms. Soon the *Direktor von Soldatenkino* joined the local collaborationist party and offered his services as a driver for German officers.

The Casino was a fruitful theater of operations. In 1942, the head of the intelligence service of the German Staff, Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, made a speech in front of 500 officers at the Casino Theater. Canaris spoke for three hours about new submarine-diving techniques, new types of painting for submarines to prevent air detection and about South America's secret bases. For secrecy, the theater had been emptied of all non-German personnel. Although he was in charge of cracking down on the Resistance all over Europe, Canaris did not know that right below his feet, behind the closed doors of the prompt

box, Herr *Direktor von Soldatenkino* was taking notes. Jean-Marie did not understand German, but the Yugoslavian projectionist Oscar Gasparovic did, and was whispering the translation to Jean-Marie. This lasted for half an hour until the projectionist broke down and refused to continue.

German units stationed in Besançon were usually quartered at the university, and this attracted Jean-Marie like a magnet. The compound was heavily guarded, except on days when divisions left to be replaced by others. One day Jean-Marie and a friend, Fernand Mathieux, decided to visit the place. Mathieux, a police inspector, had a providential flash of intuition: he returned the next day to interrogate the campus janitor under the pretext that trespass had been reported and that he had been assigned to investigate the case. It turned out that the janitor, Paul Bouveresse, was a disfigured veteran French soldier of the Great War. Like most veterans, he hated *les Boches* (the Jerries), and would have given his life for Maréchal Pétain, the great military hero of the Battle of Verdun (1916). The inspector had the nerve to ask the janitor whether he would be willing to work for the Maréchal. The janitor said yes, and agreed to pass information and documents outside the compound. Like most Frenchmen at the time, the janitor was convinced that *le Maréchal* was buying time with the Germans while preparing for revenge. "Strictly speaking, this was not a lie since [for the same purpose] our material went to Lyon!" says Jean-Marie.

The janitor proved a resourceful man indeed. Armies

are huge bureaucracies that exchange a lot of information, and staff officers have to destroy masses of decoded documents each day. In Besançon, the destruction was a ritual presided over by the General in person. Each day, he would show up at the janitor's boiler room with the Staff. The janitor lit a match and produced huge, convincing flames. The Staff would leave. And the janitor, who had rigged a protective section inside the combustion chamber, would smother the flames and pull the bundle out. Usually, only the outside had burned and most of the content was intact — like a jacket potato at a barbecue. Then it became a matter of getting the documents out of the heavily guarded compound, mostly by hiding them in bags containing mowed lawn clippings or in a child's pram.

Jean-Marie's biggest coup happened in early May 1942 as a convertible Mercedes parked in front of his cinema. The officer stepped out to eat at the next-door restaurant, leaving his thick brief case on the back seat. While the bored driver paced up and down, Jean-Marie stood on the lookout and one of the cinema's ushers coolly grabbed the briefcase. As it turned out, the officer was Chief Inspector of the Supply Corps and Paymaster for the Reich's armies. The briefcase contained detailed reports on the state of the armies and divisions stationed on the Western Front all the way from Holland to the Mediterranean. One section began with "Casualties on the Russian front are so heavy that..." The briefcase was in the *Direktor von SoldatenKino's* office long before the officer returned... and shortly before his driver was transferred to the Russian Front.

Channeling intelligence to Lyon was Jean-Marie's task as organizer. The no-man's land between occupied and non-occupied France had become a virtual frontier. Avoiding patrols and checkpoints, a complicated chain of intermediaries relayed documents from one secure home to the next. The intelligence services would collect the material from various "mailboxes," like the bakery of Jean-Marie's brother Pierre in the non-occupied territory. The information was analyzed and transmitted to the British. On certain occasions, Casino would meet Kaiser for instructions in a house on the other side of the no-man's land. It was at one such occasion that Jean-Marie brought himself the Chief Inspector's briefcase. "The Germans are lost!" exclaimed Kaiser, as he read the documents in front of Jean-Marie.

The Casino network's efficiency began to decline after November 1942, when the German army occupied the free zone, complicating smuggling and all the other illegal activities in which the *Direktor von Soldatenkino* indulged. De Gaulle's political agenda became a new source of danger. The British and the Americans thought de Gaulle represented no one, and to further his legitimacy,

le général needed to show that he controlled the Resistance. Delegates like Jean Moulin, the textbook hero of the Resistance, "unified" the Resistance (on paper), while Général Charles Antoine Delestraint, a deGaulle co-strategist "took command" of the "Secret Army." This agitation exposed the Resistance to German infiltration and raids. Well trained by Kaiser, Jean-Marie believed that an efficient intelligence network needed as little contact as possible between cells. Believing that gathering intelligence was enough, he refused requests to mount a local *maquis* (underground fighter network).

The fewer people who knew, and the less they knew, the better. With reason: the French produced 3.5 million letters denouncing other French during the occupation period! Everyone was a threat. For instance, in the first group Jean-Marie had built in 1940, one guy, seduced by the Nazi doctrine, joined the Gestapo. "But he had the good taste not to denounce us."

Jean-Marie never told his parents about his Resistance activities in spite of the ominous yellow signs that warned that spies risked the lives of their family and relatives up to the fifth degree of blood relationship. "This was my great dilemma," he explains. "But I reckoned that my parents' reputation would keep them out of trouble. Being neither Jew, nor Communist, nor freemason, they ranked among the respectable people in Besançon and the authorities knew that arresting them would create trouble locally." This calculation turned out to be right, but he could not know for sure until it was put to the test.

In the winter of 1943, the Gestapo cracked down on the 2nd clandestine bureau in Lyon and arrested most officers in one spectacular sweep. In a vaulted cellar, they found rows and rows of neatly packaged documents labeled "Casino." The Gestapo followed the trail to Pierre Bressand's bakery.¹ Learning this, Jean-Marie dissolved his network. He was hiding and about to flee to Switzerland when the Gestapo arrested him on June 12.

Jean-Marie was questioned for 19 days but never revealed anything. Because of the quality of the material found in Lyon, the Gestapo assumed it came from a traitor in the German Staff. They kept asking who Casino was, and Jean-Marie said he did not know. But after two weeks, they got the true picture from a French intelligence officer who spoke under torture. "Then they changed their tune and questioned me about who else was in it. They beat me with a small flail that almost broke me completely. I almost spoke when they said that they had detained my parents. I looked at the stenographer, and she waved a negative to me. I don't know who she was, but this saved me from falling into the trap."²

The Gestapo transferred Jean-Marie to the camp of

¹ Fortunately, they could not arrest Jean-Marie's brother; he was already in a French jail for having sold flour to the *maquis*.

² After the war, Jean-Marie Bressand's file was found in archives of the Gestapo and his behavior became a textbook case for French officers in training in the event of violent interrogation.

Compiègne, northeast of Paris. His file bore the ominous label NN, for *Nacht und Nebel* (Night and Fog). This meant he was to be exterminated as soon as he entered Germany.³ The camp's chief told him that he was regarded as hostage number 1, to be killed in case of reprisals for the murder of German soldiers by the French Resistance. Entertaining no illusions about his future, Jean-Marie decided to escape.

He soon found the weak spot in the camp's fence: the coal depot. On that side, there were fewer watchtowers, and the coal shed provided a shelter, plus a way of climbing the first fence. Only one guard usually followed the coal detail of eight men, who were pushing and pulling a coal cart. Jean-Marie waited for his turn to be on detail and as the coal cart rolled by the shed; he jumped behind the shed and feverishly began climbing. One rotten plank broke in a great noise. He then crossed the fence, and the barbed wire, cutting himself deeply. The guard shot at him point blank without hitting him. Then he jumped the second fence and the third, never looking back. He was out in 15 seconds. "To this day, I still don't understand how I made it," he says.⁴

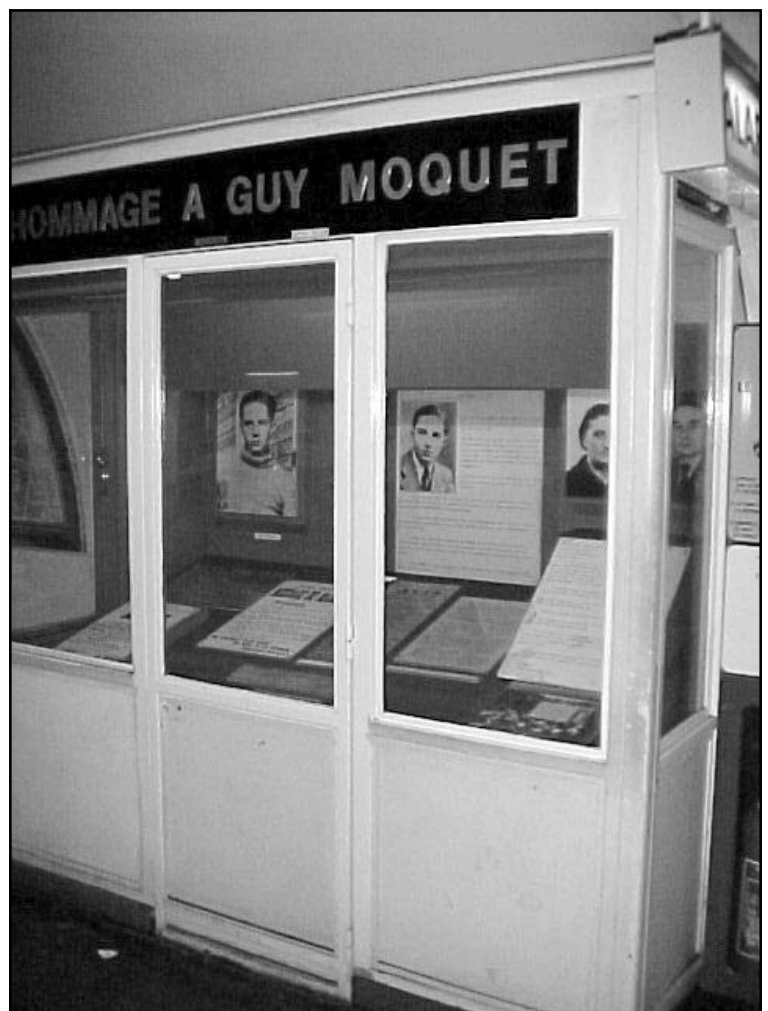
Jean-Marie made it to Switzerland, where he was jailed for 20 days until Algiers, the new center of de Gaulle's shadow government, confirmed that Jean-Marie was really the one he claimed to be. He tried to resume intelligence work from Switzerland, but he had lost his nerve — he was only half his normal weight of 80 kilograms. Besides, his identity was known. His escape to Algeria was organized via Spain, but the smuggler who was supposed to take him and his friend, Jean Lhérisson, across the Pyrenees dropped them at the frontier. They nearly died in the snow and then had to escape from a Spanish concentration camp before making radio contact with the Free-France submarine *Casabianca* waiting off the port of Barcelona.

As a captain in the Free French Forces, Jean-Marie was parachuted over Besançon on August 30, 1944 with a team of radio telegraphers to report the movement of German troops as the Allies were marching up the Rhone valley. The telegraphers saw their *capitaine* do a free fall of 1400 meters before his parachute opened 100 meters over ground. Because of a thunderstorm, they landed 30 kilometers away from the planned objective. This turned out to be one more lucky break: one of the flight officers was a spy — shot for treason, as it turned out later —

and the thunderstorm saved Jean-Marie and his unit from the Germans who were waiting for them.

* * *

Not all men and women of the Resistance had Jean-Marie's luck. Most didn't. In Paris, my home is next to the Guy Môquet subway station. Inside the booth that used to be the stationmaster's office, there is a moving Guy Môquet display with a picture of young Guy Môquet, who died before a German firing squad at age 17. There are pictures of his mother and of his father, who was the communist MNA [Member of the National Assembly] for Paris. A small poster explains that Guy Môquet had been jailed in the fall of 1940 for protesting against German occupation. An orange French-German sign blames the population for the murder of a German



At the subway station next door, the old stationmaster's booth found a use as a memorial. Guy Môquet's letter to his parents begins, "Dear little mom and dad, I'm about to die. I want you, little mom especially, to be courageous."

³ According to the odd rules of the armistice, it was the French government that had rights over life and death in France, and the Germans, always true to form, respected that.

⁴ Aside from sheer luck, the only other possibility was that the German authorities wanted to use Jean-Marie as a decoy who would eventually lead them to other Resistance workers — which would explain their insistence at telling him that he was NN, and first hostage.

officer and warns that 100 hostages will be shot if the culprit does not surrender. Then there is the list of all the hostages shot, mostly Communist. Next to Guy Môquet's farewell letter to his mother, there is a chunk of a plank on which a hand swiftly carved a message asking that the "27 who will die" never be forgotten.

The one detail missing in the display is the most shocking one: the list of hostages shot was not the one supplied by the Germans. The Vichy French Minister of the Interior, who reviewed it, removed 40 names and replaced them with 40 Communists. "I could not let die 40 good Frenchmen," he later said at his trial.

The collaborationist regime of Vichy, named after the new French capital, was profoundly Conservative, anti-Communist, anti-Republican and anti-Semite, but it was *legitimate*. It almost did not come into existence. Many members of the government, among them an obscure deputy Secretary of State to War named Charles de Gaulle, wanted to evacuate the government and remnants of the French army to Algeria to continue the struggle. After all, the poorly-used air force was still strong, and the French navy was the second most powerful in the world. But the defeatists won the day and Pétain got himself assigned as head of government by successfully arguing that a French government should not leave France.⁵ After the armistice was signed with the Germans on June 22, the Parliament legitimately scuttled the Republic and gave all powers to Pétain on July 10.

Hundreds of books have been written to explain what the Vichy government was all about, but nothing conclusive was ever published. The only firm action it ever took was jailing Communists and members of the Resistance, and hunting down Jews. Pétain's obsession with asserting French sovereignty ensured that the Germans assigned very few troops to police the French — under 30,000, by some accounts. As a war tribute to Germany,

France paid a daily sum of 400 million francs, in kind. It supplied Germany with only a few soldiers — fewer than 50,000 — far less than Romania's 30 divisions — but let hundreds of thousands of men go to Germany as voluntary and forced labor.

On the whole, no foreign power got what it wanted from occupied France, and all acted to neutralize it. France was contributing to the German war effort, but never went so far as to declare war on the United States or Britain. Hitler's policy of chopping the country into half-a-dozen different administrations was the most effective way to keep it under control. Meanwhile, the Americans and the British maintained direct and indirect diplomatic relations with the Vichy government. They handled Pétain tactfully, for fear that if such a potentially powerful country ever got its act together and put all its weight behind the Reich it would have complicated any landing of troops.

The best description of the population's mood can be found in a series of tales of fantasy written in 1943 by Marcel Aymé under the title of *Passe-Muraille*. The first short story, which depicts the highs and lows of a Frenchman who discovers he has the gift of walking through walls (literally *passer la muraille*), is an apt image of the overall frustration. In another story, people have to deal with new restrictions that reduce their rations to 15 days' worth of life per month in order to undercut the black market — the rest of the month is spent in limbo. The last short story, titled *En attendant* (waiting), is a series of monologues from 14 people waiting in the bread line during the war of 1939-72.

In retrospect, it is easy to blame the French for being so resigned as *attentistes* (ones who wait), but nobody in 1943 knew who would win, nor when — hence Aymé's joke about the war of 1939-1972. Food was scarce. Nobody had enough coal to heat more than one room. One



Pierre Georges, war name Colonel Fabien, was the first Frenchman to kill a German occupier in August 1941 at the Barbès subway station. He did this to show his Resistance pals that the Germans were not invincible. He became famous for his spectacular actions and evasions. He died in the explosion of a bomb in December 1944.

⁵ He prevailed through a complicated maze of maneuvers, one of which consisted of sending deputies by ship to Algiers with promises to form the government, and then arresting them upon their arrival for having fled from France!



Appointed as captain in the regular army, Jean-Marie Bressand was sent to Ecuador in 1945 with a mission to find Nazi bases. "The Ecuadoran Minister of Defense was waiting for me at the airport with troops and fanfare. I was their first French Résistant. I was de Gaulle." He returned to Ecuador in 1946 as a civilian and opened virgin forest for the next five years.

shot the first German occupying soldier, in August of 1941, but only after the Germans had invaded Russia! This was nothing like Yugoslavia, where soldiers and civilians organized themselves overnight into a guerrilla force tying down as many as eight German divisions, and successfully ousting the Germans before the Soviets arrived.

Nobody will ever figure out the actual numbers of member of the French Resistance.⁶ They were few, and their degree of involvement varied. Some specialists say they were as few as 10,000 in early 1942, although the Germans numbered them at 130,000. The numbers swelled in 1942 as the Germans imposed mandatory work service and occupied the Free Zone. They decreased in 1943 as the Gestapo, the

and a half million men were prisoners of war in Germany and their families lived in abject poverty. The economy had collapsed five times since 1939. Newspapers were down to a single sheet printed on both side. Most Frenchmen never saw the actual conditions of the armistice, and trusted Pétain. In conversation with people who lived through that period, you realize that the little German vocabulary that became French stock is not B-series war-film vocabulary like *Achtung* (watch out), *Schnell* (fast), and *Jawohl* (yes of course), but *Kartoffellen* (potatoes), *Papier* (IDs), and *Ausweis* (passport).

This January, I spent a week of cross-country skiing in the Black Forest with six members of the hiking club. They were good skiers, although four of them were old enough to have stories to tell about the occupation. Jean, who was eight at the beginning of the war, remembers the hunger and the cold, but also the moment when his mother lay over him as Stuka dive bombers were machine-gunning a crowd at the train station during the Blitzkrieg. As for Jacques, who is now 76, he did not see the Liberation of Paris because he was working in German factories as a volunteer, building airplanes while living in German households. He actually finished the war in a labor camp, neither as a Jewish prisoner nor as a political deportee, but simply because he had a fist fight with the SS sergeant who was the foreman in his factory.

* * *

The French had so little fighting spirit left in July 1940 that of the 130,000 French soldiers that were evacuated from Narvik and Dunkirk, only 7,000 continued the struggle. A year after the defeat, one French Communist

German army and the French Militia cracked down on networks. They swelled to 200,000 in 1944, as it became evident that Germany would not win the war and that the Americans would land in France.

"Do you want to make yourself useful?" was the coded invitation to join the Resistance," explains Claude Lehmann, a Jew living in Nice during the occupation (see JBN-10), and who was approached by the father of a friend in 1943. "When he put a pistol in my hand, I turned white and he figured I wouldn't be that useful. He made me mailman." Claude Lehmann carried money and letters between Antibes, Monaco and Cannes before joining André Malraux's *brigade Alsace-Lorraine*.

Even among those who fought for the good cause, the variety of experiences is absolutely mind-boggling. Last fall, in the Atlantic port city of La Rochelle, I met a man who also had been marching up the Rhone valley, André Lortsch, a retired professor of English. Only two years before liberating France, he had been a French serviceman based in Algiers, where he fought against the Americans during the November 1942 landing. "We shot at them until we were told to stop," he says. By a funny twist of history, Lortsch is married to a German woman and speaks English at home.

Our friend Jean-Marie Bressand was another man in that army and he arrived in Besançon at the end of August to witness women being shaved, whipped, and paraded naked for having slept with Germans or having loved one. "The guys who punished women were often the worst creeps, collaborationists and black marketers, who had to go this low to clear their name. That was the

⁶ How much of this resistance was Communist? Again, it depends when. It certainly was a majority after June 1941, when Germany invaded Russia. Before that, they were not as many, but they were involved nonetheless. True, Germany and USSR had signed a Pact of non-aggression. However, since neither Germans nor the Vichy government regarded Communists as a desirable element, many Communists did not wait for orders to join in the Resistance. Many acted out of patriotism, too.



The old town of Oradour-sur-Glane, east of Limoges, is an official “martyr-town,” and its ruins bear witness to the massacre of an entire population, 642 people, by the SS division Das Reich.

real ugly part. But as I saw this scene, I never told them that we had not been fighting for four years for this mockery of justice. I really regret not saying a word. But I had a team to move, we had a war to fight and I wanted to see my parents.”

All people who lived through that period can recall the moral disintegration of the French, exacerbated by the ambiguous nationalism of Pétain and his followers. For the better part of 1944, the country was ripped apart by civil war between underground fighters and the Militia. After July and until October, people settled scores. Small-time collaborators took the brunt of it, but most of the purge was made by 11th-hour Resistance Members who needed to clear their names or make cumbersome witnesses disappear. After this, the government started the *official* purge, known as *l'épuration*. The same magistrates and the same police that had been faithful to Pétain then judged collaborators. De Gaulle got things working pretty swiftly.

In 1945, when all of this was behind, Jean-Marie was having a family discussion about the war when his father Virgile exclaimed: “*Mais mon fils, tu es Dreyfusard!*” (Son, you’re a Dreyfusard!) — a direct allusion to the long-lasting quarrel that divided France between 1894 and 1906 about a Jewish army captain, Alfred Dreyfus, suspected of spying for the Germans (see JBN-10). Two world wars, fifty million dead and one genocide later, Virgile Bressand was still trying to cope with reality using old labels that did not mean much. “To my father, this was the great revelation: he could be

Catholic and adhere to ideals of the left,” says Jean-Marie.

* * *

This summer, I happened to be in Limoges and I visited one of the neighboring villages named Oradour-sur-Glane. On the morning of June 10, 1944, shortly after the American landing in Normandy, an SS regiment arrived in the tiny village, rounded up the population, and divided the men from the women. The men were taken in groups of 50 to sheds, shot and burned. Women and children were grouped inside the church and simply burned. Eight people escaped, but 190 men, 245 women and 207 children died. The SS returned the next day to finish the burning and render most corpses unidentifiable.

The French remember Oradour-sur-Glane as the biggest wholesale massacre of civilians in France — not withstanding the 75,000 French Jews who died in Germany and Poland. It was indeed a striking demonstration of Nazi barbarity, and the government played it up. Oradour-sur-Glane had no known connection to the Resistance, to Communists, to Pétainistes, to Jews, and the martyr-village became the official symbol of the suffering of the innocents — obviously a label everyone then sought. The commemoration of Oradour-sur-Glane in the years after the war and to this day was part of de Gaulle’s great soothing program.⁷

History is a complex matter, and the object of countless manipulations, conscious and unconscious.⁸ Should de Gaulle be blamed for creating myths such as *la France résistante*?

⁷ Read, *Oradour: Arrêt sur mémoire*, published by American historian Sarah Farmer of the University of Iowa.

Like all great historical figures, he was particularly adept at recreating history, but all societies, all ideologies need rewriters. What about this one? The US army and the British, helped by the Canadians and the French, defeated Germany. It does not subtract respect from those who died on D-Day and in the year of combat that ensued to underline the fact that the Soviets were defeating Germany pretty much on their own and that the chief purpose for the Allies' landing was to protect a sphere of influence.

Oradour-sur-Glane became the object of one more national psychodrama in 1953. The reason was the trial of the 14 Alsatian SS soldiers involved in the massacre. As a result of the armistice of 1940, Alsace and Lorraine had been annexed to the 3rd Reich and 130,000 Alsatians and Lorrains served in the German army — mostly under compulsion, sometimes voluntarily. "Even the French language was forbidden. For fear of going to jail, my parents, although French, spoke German at home for fear that we would speak French in public," recalls Dr. André Busch, who lives in the border town of Sarreguemine (and who is the father-in-law of another Belgo-Canadian friend of mine). André Busch was one year old at the time of the re-annexation and he grew up speaking German until the Liberation. As a young man, he later resented the attitude of the other French towards his accent — barely audible nowadays. In truth, the Lorrains and the Alsatians were torn during the war: "My uncle died in the French uniform at Sedan in 1940, but my older brother was drafted in the German army in 1943. This was not a first: during WWI, my grandmother had two cousins who fought on both sides."

Therefore, the Alsatians and the Lorrains took the trial as their own trial, and the issue nearly ripped the country apart. The *Limousins* (from the area around Limoges) would not accept that killers be spared. But neither the Alsatians nor the Lorrains would agree that poor men enrolled by force be found guilty for having obeyed orders. "What of the French policemen who arrested Jews?" they asked. The judges found the Alsatians guilty. But a few days later, the Parliament gave them amnesty. In a way, this Judgment of Solomon summarizes France's difficult relationship to the history of the period. It has never purged the sentence it has served itself, but it's not innocent either.

* * *

While France was busy tearing itself apart over its involvement with Nazi Germany, Jean-Marie was somewhere else: inventing language-immersion programs and twinning cities across the world, two apparently benign ideas that were a novelty in 1950.

These notions came to him in Ecuador, where he



Not far from my home, on the Butte Montmartre, there is a statue of a man emerging from a wall. This is Passe-Muraille (literally: Cross-Wall), one of the most famous literary creations of the occupation period. Journalist and author Marcel Aymé (1902-67) imagined a man who woke up one day with a unique gift. This is probably the best spiritual description of the longings of a people who wished they could walk through walls.

⁸ The French are far from having a monopoly on weird relationships with history. In Montreal, on Dante Street, in the heart of a neighborhood called Little Italy, there is a tall, dark church. If you enter that dark church, and look into the dome, not far from Jesus, you will find the figure of Benito Mussolini seated on a horse. In Montreal. In the heart of the Italian community.

spent the years of 1945-1950 clearing virgin forest. "I had become political in the Resistance, in the sense that I understood what democratic principles are, and the importance of checks and balances. Nazism was the opposite of open-mindedness and communication." The young idealist thought he had seen the worst, but he did not suspect how closed closed-mindedness can be.

Returning to France in 1950, Jean-Marie created *Le Monde Bilingue* / The Bilingual World. The central idea was that children have an innate capacity for learning and that instead of being taught a second language or as a second language, they could learn all subjects in that language, if taught by professors who spoke fluently. "The idea was to reproduce in the normal education system what rich kids get with their British, French governesses. This was a revolutionary idea at the time, and various associations began running test programs with British and French teachers. To the skeptics' surprise, children learned faster than their teachers could teach and showed an almost permanent fluency. The idea spread like wildfire and became popular in the US, in Canada and in Britain.

Jean-Marie also created the Twin City program, partly out of need of facilitating teachers' exchange. "But mostly just to bring people closer," he says. "Think of it. For the first time, cities could meet foreign cities, officially, over the head of the Foreign Office. This was a revolution."

Jean-Marie, who had as many as 10 people working for him full-time, soon grew dissatisfied. Twin-city programs were limited to Europe and America, which brought together only the same kind of people. Too easy. So he got in touch with another nonconformist named Félix Kir. As a hero of the Resistance, a Canon of the Church and mayor of Dijon, Félix Kir was an odd cookie by all French standards — all the more so since he fancied mixing black-currant liqueur with white wine, a drink that now bears his name. It was with such company that Jean-Marie breached the Iron Curtain in the midst of the Cold War by twinning Dijon with Stalingrad!

Naturally, this attracted flak right and left, first in McCarthyist America and soon in Europe. Stalinists said he wanted to contaminate the USSR. And their opponents claimed that Jean-Marie was a *loup dans la bergerie* (a wolf in the sheepfold). Funding disappeared. From then on, Jean-Marie fought an uphill battle on very steep terrain. It did not help that neither second-language teachers' lobbies nor teachers' unions liked the notion of massively exchanging teachers, which involved too much flexibility between national systems.

The wind changed slowly in Jean-Marie's favor, and it took another 20 years before European governments began thinking that this might be a good idea. His tenac-



In political circles, Jean-Marie Bressand is known as the promoter of language immersion schools and of twin cities.

In 1957, this born anti-conformist twinned Dijon and Stalingrad. Neither the Left nor the Right liked this. In the 1960s, he twinned African and French cities – to more criticism. In the 1970s and early 1980s, it was Libya's turn.

Nowadays, he has a dream: what better place to hold a Babylon 2000 conference than Iraq!

ity made him a candidate for the 1983 Nobel Prize for Peace, but his ideas remain little applied except in Canada and in the tiny, autonomous Italian region of Valle d'Aosta, on the French border.

Meanwhile, the Iron Curtain had grown thinner during the détente, and Jean-Marie, as non-conformist as ever, was busy trying to cut through other walls — call them "Sand Dunes" or "Ebony Fences." For instance, he promoted the twinning of African and French cities. He was denounced again: the left accused him of neo-colonialism, while the right said he wanted to bring in more immigrants. Just imagine what happened when, later, he met Muammar Khadafi in an attempt to build bridges with Libya? Still another sand storm will rise if he gets his way with a new project — a language conference called Babylon 2000. Guess where he wants to hold it? In Iraq! "Bringing people closer is a simple enough idea, but you wouldn't believe the number of people who earn a living at doing precisely the opposite." □



The size and location of this huge WWII memorial, in the town of Sarlat, south of Limoges, is not a matter of chance. It was a hotbed of Resistance. The memorial names not only the soldiers who died, but also the local civilians killed for acts of Resistance or who perished in deportation – including Jews, a rarity. The church, however, simply added the names of soldiers who fell in 1940 to the WWI plaque. The pattern is not universal: elsewhere, it's churches that remember 1939-1945 and towns that cling to 1914. That tells where they stood.

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Phone: (603) 643-5548 E-Mail: ICWA@valley.net
Fax: (603) 643-9599 Web Site: www.icwa.org

Executive Director: Peter Bird Martin
Program Administrator: Gary L. Hansen
Publications Manager: Ellen Kozak

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