

THE COURAGE TO CARE

Told by Allan Luks

Adapted from the book *The Healing Power of Doing Good*, by Allan Luks with Peggy Payne

“Please, may I come in?” asked the woman at the door. It was dark and she was frightened. Magda Trocme opened the door. “Come in,” she said. Later she admitted, “I did not know it would be dangerous. Nobody thought of that.” The woman at the door was *Juif*— a German Jew. She had come to this village in the mountains of France to hide until the Nazi regime was over.

André Trocme, a Protestant minister, and his wife, Magda, wanted to help. “Will you hide the Jews?” André had been asked. “Is your village prepared to do that?” He had gone to the town church council, and in minutes they had agreed. Now they were tested. A German Jew was at the door seeking shelter.

Le Chambon-sur-Lignon sits on a plateau surrounded by the high mountains of south central France. During World War II and the German occupation, the community of Le Chambon made a collective decision to hide Jews who were fleeing Hitler’s wrath. They refused to identify their Jewish neighbors and instead created a haven for Jewish children and families from all over the world. Not one refugee was turned in or turned away. In the end, five thousand Jews found shelter there, a number equal to the native population of the town.

In Le Chambon, Jewish children went to school with Gentiles. They

played together, sometimes with a pig that they called Adolf. At night the Jewish children hid and slept in the barns and stables of farms around the town. In the morning they emerged from their hiding places to go to school. A young village boy gave the signal to let Jewish children know when the road was safe. When the shutters to his room were open, the road was open. When the shutters to his room were closed, they were to return to their hiding places.

Over and over the residents of Le Chambon were pressured to turn in the Jews, and each time they refused to cooperate with the Nazis and the occupation government. As a pacifist, André Trocme urged his parishioners and neighbors to resist violence with “weapons of the spirit.” When asked to list the names of Jews in hiding, he refused, declaring, “The Jews are my brothers.” He was imprisoned for his strong convictions. When the police came to take him away, Magda invited the gendarmes to sit and eat while she packed her husband’s suitcase. To offer them such a kindness was nothing extraordinary, according to her. “There we were, and it was time to eat. . . . It was nothing at all.”

Years after the war was over, film director Pierre Sauvage came to Le Chambon to learn more about this story. Sauvage had his own reasons for this visit: “It was in Chambon that I was born, in March 1944, a Jewish baby,” he says. “I was very lucky to see the light of day in a place that was committed to my survival, at the very time when much of my family was disappearing into the abyss.” Sauvage interviewed the aging survivors of World War II for his documentary *Weapons of the Spirit*, to discover why the citizens had acted as they did. What had given them the courage to care and to risk their own lives to save these

Jews?

Many of the villagers were Huguenots, French Protestants whose ancestors had been persecuted by the Catholic kings of France. The stories they'd heard all their lives of what their forebears had been through helped prepare them to take a courageous stand. When the time came, they were eager to help others who were being persecuted. When many other congregations across Europe had closed their eyes to what was occurring around them, the people of this church understood the word of God to mean that they should help their brothers, the Jews. And all the townspeople, many of whom were not Huguenots, embraced their heroic example.

Sauvage asked the question again and again and often got the same response—a slight shrug of the shoulders and these simple words of explanation: “It was the right thing to do.”

To learn more about Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, see Pierre Sauvage's movie *Weapons of the Spirit*. To order, visit http://chambon.org/chambon_foundation/weapons_en.htm.