

A MOST PERSISTENT HAVEN: LE CHAMBON-SUR-LIGNON

The story of 5,000 who would not be bystanders—and of 5,000 more

PIERRE SAUVAGE

I am a 39 year-old European-born Jew, which means that around the time of my birth, much of my family was humiliated, tortured and murdered in the Nazi death camps. As the world watched.

But the specific world into which I was born is a place called Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, in France. There I was born; there I was welcomed into this life; there the others did not watch, but reached out their hands.

And today, 39 years later, I am the father of a three year-old boy, to whom I shall one day have to explain what happened in those days, in those places. What shall I tell him of the world, and of the ways of the world with the Jews?

Once, while preparing to make a documentary—I am a filmmaker—I did quite a bit of research on the reasons why Auschwitz wasn't bombed. There are, it turns out, many answers to that question, all of them disturbing. But I have no doubt that the most basic answer is that the world did not care enough.

Is that what I should tell David, my son? Shall I then teach him that there is no purpose to be served in working and living with others, that anti-Sem-

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Readers with personal knowledge of righteous conduct during the Nazi era are asked to contact Friends of Le Chambon at 8033 Sunset Boulevard #784, Los Angeles, CA 90046.

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itism is our irreversible destiny?

Or perhaps I should avoid the matter altogether, let it be understood as an aberration that has no continuing relevance to our secular, assimilated lives?

I can do neither, for I was born in Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, and so I know that in the midst of the carnage, there was decency, in the midst of the evil, good. I know more: I know that there are people, and always will be, whom even the most ferocious pressures cannot make into bystanders to human suffering.

So I am grateful to Le Chambon-sur-Lignon not only for my life, but also for my knowledge, which will one day be David's, too. And perhaps all the Davids'.

At the start of the war, my parents, Barbara and Léo Sauvage, left Paris for Marseilles, in the then-unoccupied zone of southern France; from there, they moved to Nice, on the Riviera. But this was no time for dawdling in the sun. They had been lucky so far, especially since my mother is a Polish Jew, born in Bialystok, and was thus particularly vulnerable to being caught in a roundup of the kind the Vichy collaborationsists conducted frequently, or even by the Nazis themselves. (Father is a French Jew, from Lorraine, in eastern France.)

The beautiful French landscape, it should be remembered—as the French do not like to—was then scarred by dreadful internment camps. These were not extermination camps, but the conditions in the worst of these French-run camps were no better than those in many of the Nazi concentration camps in Germany and Poland. It was the French government of the time, headed by the immensely popular Marshal Pétain, that quietly dumped Jewish refugees into these camps. It was this French government that engaged in a vociferous and energetic anti-Semitic campaign of its own, and it was this government that efficiently cooperated with the Germans when the deportation orders came—the deportations "to the East," to the Final Solution. It was with the cooperation of this government, of its police and its bureaucracy, that some 80,000 men, women and children

were handed over to the mass murderers.

And so it was that my parents, a year after the large-scale deportations began, had to determine where to hide, where to go to have a child, a Jewish child.

It so happened that a Jewish friend of my parents knew of a mountain village in south-central France, not too far from Lyon, that he thought would be as good a gamble as any. Le Chambon-sur-Lignon was a Protestant enclave outside the mainstream of Catholic—or, for that matter, of secular—France. The people of the rural area of which Le Chambon was the centerpiece had not forgotten the persecution of their own Huguenot ancestors by the kings of France. Perhaps that memory would lead them to help protect the Sauvages from harm.

So my parents rented a room in a farmhouse in Le Chambon, and it was there, in March of 1944, that I was born, at a time when much of my mother's family was being slaughtered. (The tale of that particular slaughter is told in a book—*Of Blood and Hope*—written by my mother's nephew, my cousin, Samuel Pissar.)

But here and there throughout Europe there are other heart-warming stories of Jews being provided shelter. Why, then, call particular attention to Le Chambon?

Because during the course of the war the people of Le Chambon and the surrounding area took in some 5,000 Jews. Nowhere do we have a parallel to such a story. No one was turned away. No one was betrayed. No conversion was imposed. There was a need, and the 5,000 people of the area became—no one had any idea of it at the time—occupied Europe's most determined, most persistent haven of refuge for the Jews. A compelling ratio—one life preserved per local inhabitant. ("He who saves one life. . .")

And all this under Vichy's nose, within striking distance of the SS, with convalescing German soldiers walking the streets of Le Chambon during the last year. And there, in the newly-founded secondary school, the citizens of Le Chambon set aside a room for Jewish religious services, at

which one of the Jewish teachers officiated.

So it was that in the midst of Christendom's most horrendous failure, these Christians of Le Chambon gave evidence of religion's capacity for good. The values of the Chambonnais did not permit them to turn away; theirs was a commitment anchored by and in their Christian faith. To the peasants and villagers of Le Chambon, Le Mazet, Fay and all the hamlets and isolated farms of the area, the biblical admonition to love one another was the bedrock Christian message, a message they could not ignore, no matter the risk, no matter the consequences. (Lest that message be obscured by the events of the day, the parish paper, at the very top of the first page, recalled that Jesus had said, "If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar; for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen.")

No agonizing, no intellectualizing, no rationalizing, no minimizing, no debating: Action. *Mitzvah*.

To the residents of Le Chambon, then as now, there was nothing remarkable in their behavior. And yet the rest of us know that it was most remarkable, that the fact that these people behaved as normal, decent human beings was an extraordinary fact. Shall we call it an aberration? Shall we fixate on the horror, and ignore the goodness? What shall we make of it, as a memory, as a legacy?

A place, a sequence of events largely ignored by historians, unstudied by sociologists, uncelebrated by the religious communities, Jewish or Christian, unchronicled by the media. One book—*Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*, by Philip Hallie, a professor of philosophy; and, quite recently, one award by the Hebrew Union College.

And now, a film, for that is how I have decided to inform the Davids of what happened, of what people can be. A film that records the faces, so many faces. . .

The Héritiers, a couple now in their 80s who lived up the road from where my parents and their baby were staying. Monsieur Héritier is the image of the wary French peasant—taciturn, disinclined towards any self-asserting



Top: Eva Héritier holds the infant Pierre Sauvage.

Center: Survivors in Paris, after the war—Pierre Sauvage in his mother's arms, with cousin Samuel Pissar.

Bottom: Pierre Sauvage and his father in Le Chambon.

act or word. The notion that he and his wife were in any way heroic, special, is profoundly uncomfortable to both of them. They are not social activists; if the world is askew, that is the world's problem, not theirs. They do not stress their Christian upbringing or belief. They think what they did was "normal."

Normal for the Héritiers was that from the moment Jewish refugees started arriving in Le Chambon, there was always at least one Jew, usually more, at their kitchen table; there were always one or two Jewish children sharing skimpy accommodations with their own daughters. And when the children were escorted to safety in Switzerland, as happened, they asked for more children.

The Héritiers are embarrassed that anyone would want to interview them about anything, but they don't really feel that I am interviewing them, for they remember me and my parents well. There is a picture of me as a baby in their daughter Eva's arms, for she helped take care of me. Madame Héritier happily remembers that it was in their house that I learned to walk.

And Monsieur Héritier stares resolutely at the ground when I ask the expected question: "Why did you shelter Jews?" He's not going to tell me that he thinks the question meaningless, almost stupid. He merely shrugs his shoulders and says, "When people came, if we could be of help. . ." And the answer dangles. When I press, noting the risks they were taking, Madame Héritier looks up just long enough to say simply that one gets used to the risk. And then she looks down again, hoping I will not insist on answers she believes—erroneously—she does not have.

But the Héritiers were among those who took the greatest risks, for they knew full well that the young Jewish teenager whom they sheltered was spending his nights forging false identity papers for the Jews and the other refugees who flocked to Le Chambon. Those papers were essential for survival; towards the end, Monsieur Héritier hid the paraphernalia for producing them in his beehives. (Another villager hid the false papers in his mother's grave. And the young forger,

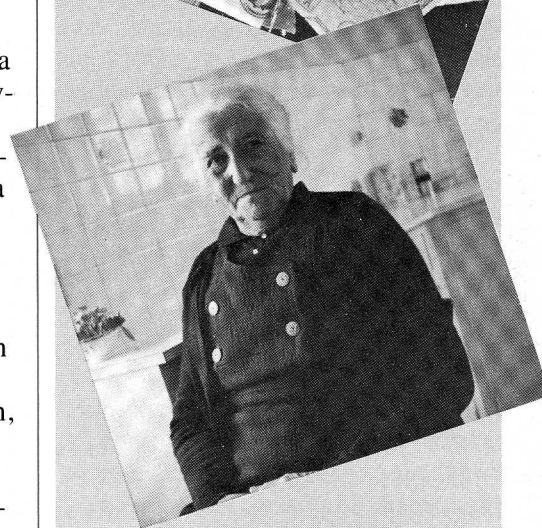
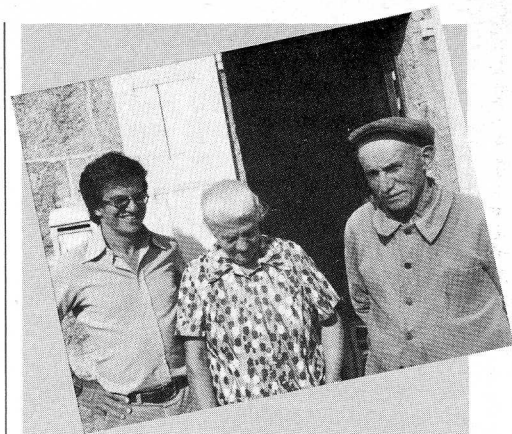
who engaged in one of the most highly punishable of anti-Nazi offenses, survived the war; he is now a pediatrician in the outskirts of Paris.)

And Madame Barraud, who is 90, and is almost never at home because she's out all day visiting the old and the sick. "My husband and I didn't have *that* many Jews," she says—she whose pension was open to the hunted at any time of day or night.

And Madame Brotttes, a member of a small fundamentalist sect who sits across the kitchen table from me and holds her head high as she proclaims that for her, as for many of the Christians of Le Chambon, the Jews were the people of God, the Chosen People, to whom she owed a special obligation. Madame Brotttes, who took care of half a dozen Jews; a peasant woman caring, among others, for a Viennese doctor and his wife and child. Who, when one of "her" Jews was caught and sent to an internment camp, mailed him precious food packages every single week.

And what of Magda Trocmé, widow of the late pastor of Le Chambon, a legend in her own right, a whirlwind of non-stop practical activity, common sense, unflinchingly available, ideally matched to her idealistic and reflective husband? What a thrill it has been for me to meet and correspond with this woman!

The Trocmés had come to Le Chambon in 1934 after serving among workers in industrial northern France. They were a cosmopolitan couple, she half-Italian, half-Russian, he half-German, half-French. They had met in New York, where he was studying at Union Theological Seminary while tutoring David and Winthrop Rockefeller, in 1921. For them Le Chambon was a sleepy, backwater place—except for one thing, which André Trocmé wrote about to an American friend a few months after his arrival: "The old Huguenot spirit is still alive. The humblest peasant house has its Bible and the father reads it every day. So these people who do not read the papers but the scriptures do not stand on the moving soil of opinion but on the rock of the word of God." A few months later, he wrote—prophetically—that he thought he was going to be able to accomplish great



Top: Pierre Sauvage returns to visit the Héritiers.

Center: The false papers of the young forger sheltered by the Héritiers.

Bottom: Marie Brotttes, today.

things in Le Chambon.

Trocme, a brilliant, inspiring man, had had difficulty finding a parish because he was a proclaimed conscientious objector, not—to put it mildly—an acceptable belief at the time. But the Trocme's had been to Germany in the early years of the Third Reich and had sensed what was coming. At one point, this Christian pacifist had seriously considered whether he had an inescapable moral obligation to take advantage of his fluency in German to penetrate Hitler's entourage and assassinate him. Ultimately, he decided that even this murder could not be sanctioned. But he remained passionately eager to demonstrate that there is nothing even remotely passive about pacifism.

The French armistice with Germany was signed on a Saturday evening. The very next morning, a morning when all France was heaving a sigh of relief, confident that the worst was at last over, Trocme preached a sermon: "The duty of Christians is to respond to the violence that will be brought to bear on their consciences with the weapons of the spirit." (*Les armes de l'esprit* is, thus, the French title of my documentary.) "We will resist," Trocme went on, "whenever our adversaries will demand of us compliance contrary to the orders of the Gospel. We will do so without fear, as well as without pride and without hate."

And for the next four years, that is exactly what happened in a tiny area of France.

And the Jews came to Le Chambon. They came because they chanced upon word of it—as in the case of my parents—or with the help of one of several admirable organizations, such as the American Quakers, who made use of Le Chambon's willingness—even eagerness—to take in both individuals and groups of Jews.

The effort was never coordinated. No person or group mobilized the villagers, the farmers, the peasants and the spiritual leaders of the area of Le Chambon into a coherent network. The people of the area are still amazed at how widespread the perilous hospitality was, are still surprised to learn that such and such a neighbor had *also*

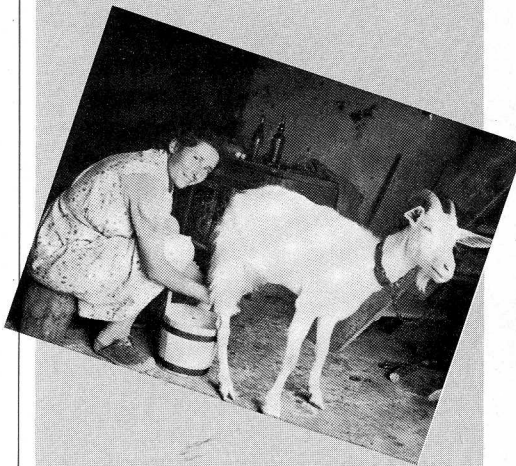
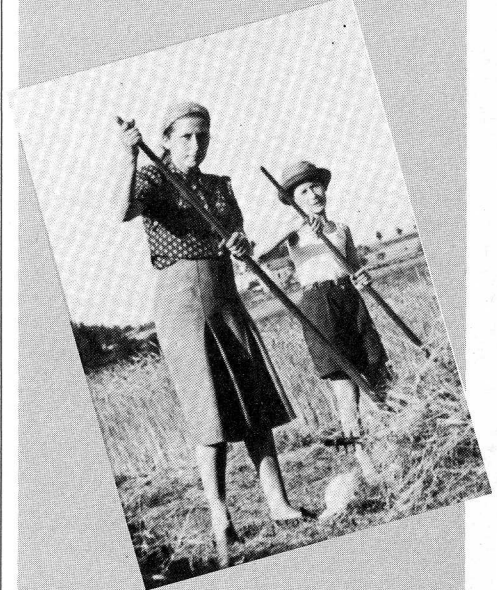
sheltered Jews. It was not a subject of discussion at the time, and it did not become a subject of discussion after the war ended and the Jews left to begin to reconstruct their lives.

There was a couple from Germany who had met and fallen in love as refugees in Paris. And then came the war, and they were separated, sent to different internment camps. In one of the worst, Gurs, the woman gave birth—it was August 1941—to a daughter, Eva. Then, avoiding calamity by way of the nearly routine miracle that marks the stories of so many of the survivors, mother and daughter were directed to Le Chambon. They made their way there under the auspices of the *Cimade*, a newly-founded organization of young French Protestant women that was ceaselessly active, throughout the war, in helping Jews, going so far even as to place volunteer workers inside the camps.

The man—the husband, the father—arrived in Le Chambon some time after his wife and daughter. He came late one afternoon, and that very night, there was a Gestapo raid on the house where they had *almost* stayed the night. (This was to prove the only successful raid of the war; while others were conducted, the villagers always managed to be alerted in time to send the Jews scurrying into the woods.) The couple and their daughter survived the war in Le Chambon, as did her sister and brother-in-law; today, they live just a few miles from my home in Los Angeles.

Among those caught in that Gestapo raid was a young cousin of Andre Trocme, who had come to Le Chambon to run a children's home funded by the Quakers. In September 1942, he wrote a letter to his parents explaining why he was not going on for his doctorate, as his parents wanted, but was instead acceding to the pastor's request that he come take charge of this new home—at least half of whose wards were Jewish.

"I think it may be time for me to assume responsibilities with regard to other people. Le Chambon will be an education for me, and that shouldn't displease you. It is also something of a contribution to the reconstruction of our world." (*Tikun olam*, we call it.) "The future will tell me whether I was



Top: 1943: Pastor Andre Trocme (tall man in the back row) visits the children's home run by Daniel Trocme (back row, far right).

Center and bottom: The Coblenz family, urban French Jews, transform themselves into farmers in the Le Chambon area during the war.

equal to the task or not, and it will tell *only* me because it is not a matter of success in the eyes of the world. I have chosen Le Chambon not because it is an adventure but because I will thus be able not to be ashamed of myself.”

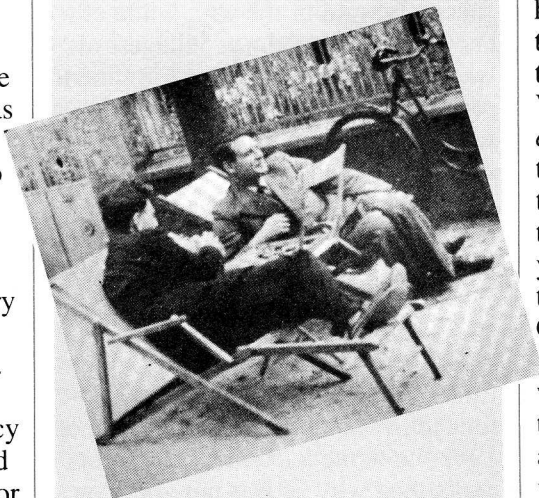
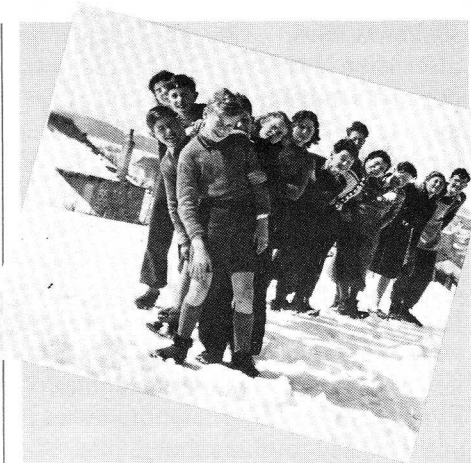
And so for nine months Daniel Trocmé, in order not to be ashamed of himself, in order *l'taken olam*, devoted himself to some children. Until, in June of 1943, the Gestapo came and arrested him. On April 2, 1944, Daniel Trocmé died in Maidanek.

Young Trocmé was one of the few martyrs of Le Chambon. Roger Le Forestier was another, a devout Christian physician who had served with Albert Schweitzer in Africa and then, still a young man, followed his commitment to Le Chambon in the early 1940s. In 1944, he was very concerned about the serious problem pregnancy of one of the Jewish women under his care. His professional expertise and his personal devotion pulled mother and son through; I cannot believe that my mother—for I was that son—would have been more effectively cared for, attended with greater dedication, in even that most modern facility where my own son was born.

And just a few months later, Dr. Le Forestier fell into Nazi hands and was murdered by the henchmen of Klaus Barbie, the SS thug who was later to become a United States intelligence operative and who is now at last, so late, being brought to justice.

There were so many others, so very many. I cannot name them all, but there is one more I cannot not name. It turns out that you cannot know who will be caught up in a conspiracy of goodness once it is launched. And it appears that a German officer, Major Julius Schmähling of the *Wehrmacht*, knew *exactly* what was going on in Le Chambon—and ordered those convalescing German soldiers, whose curiosity was sometimes aroused, to invest in recovering their own strength, to mind their own business.

So my son David, who will know that his great-grandmother Feigl Suchowolski and his granduncle Memel Suchowolski and his grand-aunt and granduncle Helaina and Da-



Top: Wards of the children's home la Guespy, many of them Jewish, Winter, 1944.

Center: Daniel Trocmé.

Bottom: Roger Le Forestier (on right).

vid Pisar, and his then-nine-year-old cousin Frieda Pisar, that all these and more were incinerated, will know as well the names Trocmé, and Le Forestier, and Héritier, and Brottes, the name Le Chambon, will know that even in those days and places the Jews had friends.

And I mean to tell him also, lest he miss the point, that there were people as good and as righteous in every single country of occupied Europe. Perhaps none saved Jews on the scale of Le Chambon, perhaps nowhere else did such a remarkable consensus emerge. But yes, even in Bialystok, even in Lithuania, even in the Ukraine, there were people who helped, individuals who risked and sometimes lost their lives, often defying not only the Nazis but their own neighbors, people whose actions—because so solitary—are in some respects even more remarkable than those of the Chambonnais. David is entitled to know such things.

As, of course, are we all. We remember the Danes and their heroism, and we remember Raoul Wallenberg and now Oskar Schindler, and we, who have taught that “the righteous Gentiles of all nations will have a share in the world to come” have made in Yad Vashem a place of honor for these *chassidei umot ha'olam*, these righteous Gentiles. (Among the few thousand there honored—so far—are the Chambonnais André Trocmé, young Daniel Trocmé and the assistant pastor Édouard Theis and his Ohio-born wife Mildred.)

But there is more, much more, that we do not yet know. We know very little about the extent of such conduct, and we know very, very little about who the good people were and less still about why they acted as they did. By and large, we have perceived them as misplaced footnotes to a macabre text. Especially to the survivors, the issue of righteous behavior has been difficult, even painful. Knowing the extent of the loss, hence the depth of the mourning, how find time or room for thanksgiving? How, how find in the grisly story a cause for celebration?

I am a filmmaker from southern California, in the United States, de-

scendant of the murdered, heir to endless gloom and memory most bitter. I was born in Le Chambon-sur-Lignon in France, and I have come to believe that the story of the righteous Gentiles is not merely interesting, that because of the extent of the atrocity and its continuing psychological costs it is an indispensable story. I cannot expect others to discover and tell that story, for the existence of the righteous Gentiles is a constant rebuke to those others; it is a reminder of their complicity, a rebuttal of the alibi that it was not possible to care, to do anything.

But I cannot accept that we, the Jews, remain so ignorant of and indifferent to the righteous. That we do seems to me to say more about our still traumatized state of mind than it does about them and their significance.

The knowledge is indispensable not just because this cynical world desperately needs to be reminded that moral behavior is possible even under the most unlikely circumstances, that it is both gratifying and appreciated. In a world that has known such darkness, in which a new darkness threatens, can we afford not to study and to celebrate goodness?

But there is more. By neglecting the righteous of the Holocaust, by not being more genuinely and actively interested in searching them out and understanding them, by not integrating them more fully and more prominently into our accounts and memorializations of the Holocaust, we fail not just the urgent universal agenda, but even our own pragmatic interests. For there is here, plainly, the opportunity to present especially dramatic and inspiring positive role models to the Gentile—especially the Christian—world. Might such models not serve as a prod to current behavior? And might our own increased understanding of the sources of righteousness not be useful to us, today, as we seek dependable allies?

And there is more. These heroes, these mostly quite ordinary people whose heroism was not a play for the spotlight, are inspiring and authentic and significant only because they contrast so dramatically with the apathy and complicity of the rest of the

world. They became heroes because there were villains; they are remembered because there was a Holocaust. We who care that the memory of the Holocaust be sustained, as a tribute to the slaughtered, as a warning to the generations, must know that people are more likely to approach its horror, to confront the fact that we live in a world that permitted an uncountable number of children to be burned because they were Jews, in a world that has known utter moral bankruptcy, if there is, at the edges of that world, the solace of the righteous, the knowledge that there were those who stood aside from that world and rejected it.

“There were so few of them.” As if moral or spiritual significance is a matter of numbers. As if we even knew the numbers in this largely uncharted chapter of our past. As if we didn’t believe, we Jews especially, that even tiny minorities may own important, perhaps even divine, truths.

The late pastor of Le Chambon lived his life, his eloquent pacifist’s life, as a demonstration of Christian faith. Yet in his unpublished memoirs, he confided that his faith was, ultimately, in the possibility of good on earth, “without which,” he added, “the theoretical existence of God doesn’t interest me.”

And I, the father of David, who want to believe in that possibility, too, who want to extend it and pass both the belief and the evidence for it on to my child and to his, am bound to seek out and to treasure and to learn from the bits and pieces I can find even in the moral rubble of these times—especially in the moral rubble of these times.

That is why, as I tell David of these things, as he learns that there is in all of us a capacity for evil and an even greater and more insidious capacity for apathy, I want him to learn that the stories of the righteous are not footnotes to the past but cornerstones to the future. I owe my life to the good people of Le Chambon. I owe even more than that to my son. ★



Top: Pierre Sauvage, his son David and his wife Barbara Rubin visit Magda Trocmé
Bottom: Magda Trocmé and David Sauvage

MOMENT



**FROM ISRAEL AMOS OZ, PRESIDENT CHAIM HERZOG
FROM CALIFORNIA THE FRIENDS OF LE CHAMBON-SUR-LIGNON
A TRAVELING JEWISH THEATRE
FROM NEW YORK MAYOR ED KOCH, 3080 BROADWAY
FROM MOSCOW LIES**