

'Weapons of the Spirit': A Journey Home

By Pierre Sauvage

Five years after I began working on it, my film "Weapons of the Spirit" is premiering tomorrow night at the American Film Institute's Fest-L.A. And I ask myself: Why did it take so long? Was it really worth it?

The film is the story of a village in France that took in and sheltered Jews during the Holocaust: Le Chambon-sur-Lignon.

I am a Jew who was born in Nazi-occupied Europe. That means that around the time of my birth, much of my family was humiliated, tortured and murdered in the Nazi death camps. While the world stood by.

Yet I was born and protected on that plateau in the mountains of south-central France. There, the day after France fell to the Nazis, the



(1) Filmmaker Pierre Sauvage in his father's arms in 1944; (2) Jewish and Christian youth at play in Nazi-occupied Le Chambon, France (1944); (3) Director Pierre Sauvage sitting before the ruins of his boyhood home in Le Chambon, France



pacifist pastors of Le Chambon proclaimed the need to resist violence "through the weapons of the spirit."

There, at the risk of their lives, the peasants and villagers of the area defied the Nazis and the collaborationist Vichy regime, turning their tiny community into occupied Europe's most determined haven of refuge for the Jews. There, in the course of four long years, some 5,000 Jews were saved — by some 5,000 Christians!

And after five years of a (not atypical) creative and financial high-wire act, the result is a movie which, in comparison with "real" movies, faces an uphill struggle to reach a wide audience: it is a true story, after all, told by the people who lived it.

So was it worth it?

It would have been worth it even if the negative had gone up in flames and the film remained only in my head. For the experience of making

this film, of learning from these "doers of good," has given my life renewed direction and strength. Such are the occasional benefits of making a documentary film.

I don't know how much my adventure of making "Weapons of the Spirit" has in common with that of other documentary filmmakers. As with all such films there were problems galore. But the important ones all turned out to be the flip side of an opportunity. At least the more I worked on the film, the more I came to perceive things that way.

For instance, getting the film off the ground was the easiest part. I had barely conceived of doing it when someone at one of the French television networks, a committed Jew, decided that this was indeed a film that should be made.

My crew and I arrived in Le Chambon just in time. The good die *old*, but several key participants in the film passed away not long after

it was shot, and every year since has brought new losses that I experience almost like a death in the family. Soon, there will be nobody in Le Chambon left to thank.

I symbolically began by filming some footage of me in the ruins of the farmhouse where I was welcomed into the world. All I was able to use later on was a long shot; my expressions in the close-ups seemed to reflect my controlled panic at the challenge that lay ahead.

At the time of World War II, most of the peasants and villagers of the area of Le Chambon were devoutly Christian descendants of Huguenots — French Protestants who had themselves known persecution and slaughter at the hands of the kings of France and their own countrymen.

Like peasants elsewhere, the older inhabitants of this windswept, wintry mountain enclave tend to be wary, taciturn and private. I knew that, like rescuers elsewhere, they would not readily expound on their deeds or their motivations.

It was thus with some apprehension that I walked up the hill for the first interview. It was to be with Henri and Emma Héritier, a peasant couple in their 80s whom I planned to film standing outside the farmhouse they had turned into a place of sanctuary.

It seemed natural to begin with the Héritiers. They remembered my parents well. Their daughter Eva had helped take care of me; several of the early drafts of the film opened with a photograph of me as an infant in Eva's arms. I knew the Héritiers would do their best to humor me.

Monsieur Héritier stares resolutely at the ground when I get to 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 . . ."

When I press on, noting the risks they had taken, 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 she does not have.

As it happens, the Héritiers were among those taking the greatest risks, for they knew full well that among the Jews they had taken in was a teenager who had become the village forger, spending his nights making false identity papers for all who needed them.

Towards the end of the war, German soldiers were stationed smack in the middle of the village. Monsieur Héritier is a beekeeper. His response to the increased threat: he hid the forger's paraphernalia in his beehives.

From that interview on, everything that could go right with the shoot did (or at least I only remember the good parts). In Le Chambon and later in Paris, I got all the interview material I needed, from Christians and Jews. If anything, it was an embarrassment of riches.

I began accumulating masses of data, documents and photographs. The contents of that file cabinet will one day be part of the historical museum being planned for Le Chambon.

The wartime snapshots were



especially important, given that the documentary filmmaker is always at the mercy of his visual material. With no one refusing to lend me their precious memorabilia, I rounded up hundreds upon hundreds of these photographs, which may well constitute the largest photographic record that will ever be assembled of Jews in any one place during the Nazi occupation of Europe.

I was also determined to place the story of Le Chambon bluntly in its historical French context. Working with a historian, I gained access to dusty, incriminating documents in France's National Archives and selected about two hours of evocative newsreel footage from which I would cull later on.

I love France, and in many respects I am and remain very French. But the shameful record of France's vigorously anti-Semitic policies during World War II, culminating in popular Marshal Petain's compliance with the deportation of Jews "to the East," needed to be unequivocally spelled out. No big deal for Americans, no doubt. But still such a raw nerve in France that no documentary filmmaker had yet addressed the subject.

The French financial participation turned out to be limited to the shoot, and not long after my return to Los Angeles, I set up a non-profit foundation, Friends of Le Chambon, in order to complete the film and promote continued interdisciplinary exploration of the issues the film raises.

I began lecturing about the necessary lessons of hope still buried beneath the Holocaust's unavoidable lessons of despair. I wrote articles. I conducted a lecture series at UCLA Extension. In effect, I was trying out my material and my approach.

Ostensibly, I was straying far from filmmaking, but I realize now that during that time I was groping, consciously and unconsciously, towards a necessary understanding of what it is the film would be about.

And at last, after several false starts, the editing itself took off for good. My editor, Matthew Harrison, was then a young filmmaker and assistant editor from Oregon who'd probably never before given a second's thought to the Holocaust. He also didn't speak a word of French, the language of much of the footage he'd be working on. But he is smart and creative, and his lack of connection to the material was a perfect match for my overcommitment. Later, post-production supervisor Dominique Oren joined our tiny team.

How I longed for video as we spent hours hunting down footage and putt-putting along in antiquated non-computer-assisted film editing; documentarians of the very near future will smile tenderly at all we still put ourselves through today.

I now faced many challenges. I

wanted the film to be dramatically effective yet historically impeccable. I knew nothing about Christianity and very little about religion. Yet I was determined to respect and convey the particular slant on life these activist Christians had exemplified in their deeds.

A complicating factor, with significant psychological ramifications, was my parents' firm wish to keep their own life histories private. Just how much of a right did I have to detail publicly the relevant circumstances of my own birth? No answer seemed obvious, but I needed to honor their feelings to the extent that I could.

Most important of all, I had to convey the heroism of my protagonists without betraying the simplicity and seeming casualness that was inherent in that very heroism. Whatever the temptations, I knew I mustn't make these people seem "larger than life." The point, after all, was precisely the opposite; if somebody hadn't already used the title, I might well have called the film "Ordinary People."

In Paris, before the shoot, I'd called Marcel Ophuls, the master documentarian of "The Sorrow and the Pity," to seek some advice. He asked whether I had a script. I said no, with some embarrassment. "Good," he said. "If you had, I wouldn't have known how to talk to you."

Indeed, I can't imagine how I could possibly have mapped out "Weapons of the Spirit" in advance. I've found that before a shoot, you can never even predict for sure who your strongest characters are going to be, let alone in what specific directions the material is going to lead you.

In any event, the effect of the footage, far more than in a dramatic film, derives from the juxtapositions you come up with in the editing room. In fact, the less you remember about your original intentions the better, and it's often most productive to use an editor who has as few preconceived ideas about the material as possible.

I once boasted to my six-year-old son David that a documentary film was like a 5,000-piece jigsaw puzzle, with the difference that few pieces seem at first to belong inevitably next to any other — and the additional twist that the pieces actually change in appearance each time they're shifted about.

My computer was an invaluable tool in this process, allowing us to have a constantly updated paper record of the ever-changing film. Mistakes and ideas would leap up at me as I shifted blocks of text on the monitor. I can no longer imagine filmmaking without a computer any more than I can imagine life without a telephone answering machine.

As the film started coming together, my biggest concern was its possible length. Just —>