

Going back to Vialas: Retracing my Family History.

The Baby Must not Cry*

I was born on the 24th of May, 1944.

Like other Jewish families, my parents and family found refuge in Vialas, between October 1943 and October 1944 but I never returned to Vialas. I came back briefly in 1984 but it was only 25 years later that I really became reacquainted with the birth-place.

In 1984, a short time before the Conference in Valleraugue, entitled *Cévennes, Terre de refuge 1940-1944*¹, I stopped at the Vidals' home, located right at the heart of the village of Vialas, the house where I was born, I went upstairs and studied carefully the two rooms where we lived so they would be engraved in my memory. Elise Vidal, our hostess, with a broad smile, talked about my grandma Juliette Dockés who had lost her husband. She remembered vividly my grandmother's crème caramel and memorial lights which were burning in her room on the third floor. After the Conference, the historian Philippe Joutard asked me why I had not opened a dossier inscribing the Vidal's name in the list of the *Righteous among the Nations*.

In 1984, during my first investigation of my family, for the Valleraugue Conference, I did not take into account how life, during the war, was filled with obstacles, so devastating for the refugees. I had asked questions to members of my family who were still young during the war and who had been hidden at that time in Valleraugue. Their hiding place was seen by them as a significant moment of their childhood. They knew the risks, they were aware of the dangers, but they saw those dangers as a kind of game. As for the adults, memories of that time were perceived differently. At first, they were reluctant to talk about it at all but when they were willing to talk about it, only remnants of their memories came back in dribs and drags.

*I want to thank you a great deal, France Pruitt, Mavis Holstein and Seraphine Segal to have gone over my English translation and have strongly encouraged me to have it done.

¹ *Cévennes, terre de refuge 1940-1944*, (Philippe Joutard, Jacques Poujol, Patrick Cabanel ed.), (1987, 2006, 2012).

The words of Doctor Simon, my cousin, revealed to me how grave the situation had been. On the 26th of August 1942, 132 foreign Jews were raided by the police and were kept in terrible conditions, without food, nor anything to drink on the Arles road, in an area called *Canto Cigalo*, before they were sent to camp of internment Camp des Milles and then, deported. He was powerless to save some sick people or pregnant women.²

Going back to Vialas: June, September 2010

In establishing the file of the righteous to grant a medal of the Righteous among the Nations to the Vidals, I realized how difficult it was to talk about the memories of that period, first for the refugees but also for the people who lodged them. I found the villagers modest and humble with feelings of moral duty well carried out in these acts of daily resistance. This is well described by Jacques Sémelin.³ These people did not boast about these acts. One of them even said *it was too late to speak about all that and they did not want to dig all that up (the past.)*

My interviewees, above all remembered, the children who were in their class at school: Lucien Simon the tallest in the class, Gabriel Oestreicher who had difficulties playing sports and the Zarch children who were disruptive. Nobody knew the exact number of the Jewish families living in the village of Vialas. In reality they were many. People at the time did not speak and had learned to be discreet. The postman Felix Chapel from Collet de Déze said *we can't say anything because in speaking, we can hurt our tongue*. Saving Jews was a collective act, everybody got down to it, stressed André Platon who was mayor of Vialas, after World War II.

The “Refugees” said their life was difficult but not clandestine. They turned up at school and gave their real names. The village protected them. Vialas apparently could not be compared to Chambon sur Lignon but there are many similarities as far the number of Jews hidden and rescued, about one thousand, the part played by the protestants (Huguenots and quakers), the pastors, the important network of hospitable persons in many villages and hamlets. Among

² Docteur Lucien Simon, *Les Juifs dans le Gard durant la Deuxième Guerre mondiale de 1939 à 1945*, Nîmes, Lacour Librairie-Editeur, 1985.

³ In particular, *Sans armes face à Hitler, La résistance civile en Europe (1939-1943)*, 1989 and his last book, *Persécutions et entraides dans la France occupée. Comment 75 % des Juifs ont survécu*, Ed Seuil, Arènes, 2013.

them and primarily, the farmers and their wives, the teachers, the employees of the town halls forging identity cards, the medical doctor and the hotels and boarding houses around. The secrecy of their acts and their solidarity helped greatly to protect a great many of them.

Childhood Memories: Vivid, and the Desire to Forget

The adults from this period have passed away. The only witnesses at that time were those who were between the age of 12 and 14, the others were too little to remember. One of them, L.S., after hesitating for several months, wrote me two or three times telling me that his memories were vivid and he believed accurate. For him, Vialas had been a time of serenity after what he had been through during his hideouts with his grandmother in the Nazi Nice traps. He was then saved by a cousin who risked his life going to get him and his family. He had painful memories because he had lost his parents at age 14 and was taken in with his sister by his grandma who the passed away in December 1943 in Genolhac. He, then, went to his aunt who took care of him in Chauffés, located a few kilometers from Vialas. This experience made him grow up very quickly. He and his aunt did not live in the village but in an abandoned house of the Pomaret in Chauffés with the permission of the public notarian. In his correspondence, he describes the surrounding countryside during his daily trip to and from school: *The house in ruins was isolated, with nature all around, two miles far from Vialas when walking along the paths but facing Vialas as the crow flies. A valley along which a small river called the Luech was running separates the spot from the village.* He also wrote: *I was never bullied or criticized by my classmates; I remember very clearly one of the students who boasted that he was a member of the militia and who suddenly disappeared.*

L. S. felt safe in the village; however he was expecting his mother to come back. It was dangerous to travel to Nîmes. He found himself there with his sister when the city was bombed by the American army. He stresses the fact that neither the Militia nor the Groupes Mobiles de Réserve (GMR) who drove up to Vialas on the 23rd and on the 24th of May, 1944 were ordered to arrest Jews but to arrest the underground resistant fighters and young people who refused to be drafted in the Compulsory Work Service in Germany (STO). Lucien, who was 14, was arrested by the militia in the La Planche, located below Vialas. He was carrying an envelope addressed to his cousin “Georges Bloch”. He was awfully scared but was finally released. This was quite a contrast from the preceding

years in Nice⁴. The village was protecting him. However his mother, who was deported, never came back.



His cousin, Gabriel Oestreicher, who was 12, appears to have been in a more secure situation. His parents and his grandparents came along with him to Vialas. Gabriel did not talk much. I have the feeling that it was too painful for him to remember. He spoke of the night when the Militia, accompanied by Germans,

came up from to Vialas from Genolhac. His teacher advised him not to speak to a disreputable man living in the same Hotel Guin as them, but he did not want to talk about that period. Too painful, no doubt. None of the members of his close family was deported, but after such a long time, he has very little recollection of what was taking place. He also did not live as a clandestine person. We may assume that the resistant spirit prevailing in the village allowed him not to have to hide. They did not know precisely what was going on.

There were some exceptions. I am thinking of a cousin who had no news from his parents and who was particularly mature did not feel the same way: *“he was aware of a lot of things”*. As a matter of fact, a number of my interlocutors have assured me: *“I have known for many years what the families had gone through during this period,” “People have devoted themselves to the refugees without shouting it out from the rooftops”*. Keeping quiet, being discreet was the main thing which enabled the families of refugees to survive. In June 2010, L. S. wrote:

“I have perceived no hostility from the population; the majority of them considered us as “refugees” and had no knowledge of what “Jews” meant. It was mainly true of the farmers who sold us food”. A great many of inhabitants have voiced a different opinion to me. They were aware of the reason why refugees came up to the village but no word was to be spoken. As for the very

⁴ Nice was occupied by the Italian Mussolini army from November 11, 1942 to September 1943. , French Jews were protected. After Mussolini's destitution in September 1943, the Nazis took over and occupied Nice starting raiding Jews who found themselves trapped in the city.

young child who became the mayor of Vialas much later, and whose grandparents the Guibals hid two Jewish doctors from Romania, he was fully aware that silence was of outmost importance. The danger was constant. However, it is a real issue to question: who knew something and what they knew.

As a whole, it seems like the population stood against the unfairness and the discriminatory features of Vichy government. But there was quite a difference in the village between two different groups of people, those who knew and those who did not know or did not care to know.

Getting ready

During the preceding months before my return to Vialas, I interviewed, my brother, who is 68, my sister who is 65, and other members of my family. I also listened to my father's recording. He had died in March 2006. I was helped a great deal with photos found in family albums.

People from Nimes who were refugees in Vialas have also supported my investigation. I have corresponded with France Pruitt, one of the Juliard's daughters whose family members were refugees from Belgium, and with Jacques Sylvander whose in-laws, the Bruguerolles, were members of the Resistance movement during the war in the maquis des Bouzèdes, not far from the village. France and her large family – they were ten of them- survived five years in the Cevennes Mountains, her parents and uncle learning how to become farmers in Mas Lafon, a farm located a few miles from Vialas. They, then, parted and hid in other valleys not to be arrested as foreign Jews, being protected by various hostesses or café owners⁵.

I talked to some of the local inhabitants who are still alive like Yvette Brignand whose family protected the Juliard family for more than two years together with many other inhabitants of Soleyrois and Vialas. I also paid a number of visits to Françoise Mercier whose brother Max was not only an active member of the Resistance movement but also married one of the Polish medical students, who was a Jewish refugee. I was encouraged in my research by Jean Paul Leon who had lived as a child in Vialas. My colleague, the historian Patrick Cabanel, helped me to persevere in this task.

⁵ France Pruitt as told by Judy Priven, *Faith, Courage and Survival in a Time of Trouble*, Bethesda, Maryland, 2005. Lynmar Brock, *In This Hospitable Land, 1940-1944*, 2008. (a historical novel about France's father).

I met and asked questions to other witnesses of the war-period. They welcomed me and told me some of their secrets. 1940-1944 were dark years. They told me that extreme acts have sometimes been perpetrated because the population fought back the enemy. That meant that they had to get rid of “collaborators” ready to give the resistant fighters away to the Vichy police. I searched the archives in Mende to find records of the census of refugees up to 1944.

I wished to be imbued with the period. I kept photos of my cousins with their schoolmates, photos of my parents with my young brother, young women from Hungary with my mother seated on the steps of Chantoiseau Hotel. When I was younger I was wondering why my family was wearing dark and long winter clothes and was looking anxious. I always kept those pictures on me.

How did my family turn up to Vialas?

Their exodus had gone through various steps. At first, my family left Remiremont and Gérardmer (Vosges) in June 1940 to reach Nîmes where they were welcomed by their relatives, Jeanne and Roger Simon. Their family was rooted in the city for many generations. My close family lived there up to 1943. Then they found refuge in small mazets (country houses) above the city. The raid of foreign Jews in August 26th 1942, the German occupation of the Southern zone, and the raids of French Jews in February, March and April 1943 throughout the area, compelled them to leave Nîmes. Afterwards, my parents and their relatives found a refuge in the town of Genolhac, and then, in Vialas, located nearby, in the department of Lozère.

Time for the Refuge: Mazets all around Nîmes



Nîmes, mazet Villa Alice, September 1943,
before leaving for the Cévennes.

In November 1942, the South zone became occupied by the Nazis. The massive deportation in July and August warned families against the uncompromising attitude of the French administration and the gendarmerie. Doctor Simon had witnessed, helplessly, the raid of foreign co-religious people, in Nîmes, on the 26th

of August, 1942 as previously written. In 1943, the Dockés, Bloch and Simon families found a shelter in small country houses, built with stones in the Mediterranean countryside around Nîmes called garrigue. The Dockés family found lodging in the Villa Alice located at the Camplanier way, three kilometers from the city center. On the other side of the street, the Bloch family was hidden too. However, they kept on working and resupplying of fresh food in the city. My father worked clandestinely as a grains dealer with a partner, my grandfather who was a cattle dealer found a provisional work as a wholesale trader riding his bicycle all over the city at the age of 63. But they could not stay longer regarding the danger they might come across. In April 1943, the Gestapo settled in Nîmes in the building⁶ where my grand-aunt Jeanne Simon was living, 13 boulevard Gambetta. She, then, was expelled and had to leave within a day.

Vialas, a safe village linked with its formal and informal networks.

Following my two grand-father's deaths, the rest of the family found the Hotel de Commerce in the town of Genolhac, where they reside for two weeks. The town is located on the border of the Gard and Lozère, two departments next to each other. However the area did not appear safe enough for them. The department of the Gard had become perilous because of the great number of



Jewish families raided by the police during that period. In 1943, the department of the Gard forbids all Jews to live there. My father finally found a small apartment in the attic of the Vidal's house in Vialas for the four of them. It was about ten kilometers from Genolhac, in a more isolated spot. We could reach the town by following a very steep road.

In 1943, the village in the Cévennes mainly populated with Huguenots, had about 900 inhabitants. It was a place where Jews from Poland, Rumania, Netherlands, Belgium and France as well as German, and Spanish political refugees, had found a haven. There was a hotel owned by the Guins and a boarding-house called Vignes-Guibal where Jewish families found

⁶ The building belongs to a Jewish family Landauer, a manufacturer whose factory was despoliated enforcing the law of despoliation of property of July 21st 1941.

accommodations in expectation of a more permanent lodging. A great number of hamlets and farms were empty because of rural depopulation. There also were places called Soleyrols, Chauffés, Castagnols, Nojaret, Le Salson, Le Villaret, Le Masuffret, and Souteyrannes where Jewish families were hidden often in the homes of the inhabitants.

Above the village, the members of the resistance had organized an underground camp, called Maquis des Bouzèdes.

The hospitality of Vialas, a protestant village, became well-known, mostly by word of mouth. The old-timed connections between Jewish and protestant families have played their part in that choice. The essential network was that of the Protestant ministers posted in Nimes who had linked with their colleagues from the Cévennes. But the village was hazardous, too. Two Jewish men had been arrested by the French police, on the 23rd of February 1943 when the police had orders to arrest foreign Jewish men from 18 to 65 years old.

The solidarity and the support of the population were very broad. They ranged from the Mayor to the Pasteur Burnand, to the teachers and a member of the resistance movement, René Evrard, the baker so-called “Paillasse”, and the butcher Reydon. All of those people played a prominent role in saving a number of refugees. Some other families were, the Vidals, the Guibals the Maurels, Miss Rauzier, the Guins, the Pellequiers, the Pons, etc... Sergeant Salager and to the gendarme Pellet courageously warned the hosts of Jewish families of their imminent arrivals.

When my family arrived in Vialas in October 1943, either the sergeant of the gendarmerie or the gendarme Pellet paid a visit to register my family. They proclaimed that they would not be exposed to any trouble. The way the streets go up and down were propitious to hiding. The houses, close from one another, were built with stone or wooden steps which were independent from the main house, lead to the third floor, a sort of attic called “tristet” in the cévenol dialect.

The lodgings were primitive. No running water. The rooms were lit with a sole bulb. Four persons, André Bloch, my father, Juliette Dockés, my grand-mother, Yvonne Bloch, my mother and Gérard my brother, were living in a two-room apartment. During the week, my father travelled to Nimes to take care of his business with Mr. Roux, a partner and wholesale grains merchant. My father was working clandestinely looking for vendors in spite of the utmost danger it meant for him as he was not allowed as a Jew to own a trade.

The family business, *Le Moulin de Provence*, was managed by a provisional administrator on the 7th March 1942 enforcing the law of despoliation of property of July 21st 1941. My father was sleeping every night in a different place. When he went to Nîmes, he carried a forged identity card identifying him as Mr. “Blanc”⁷. When I interviewed him, in 1994, he acknowledged that he was not aware of the risk of being caught. In January 1944, following her husband’s death, Rose Bloch, my grand- mother on my father side and her son Jacques Bloch, ended up to Vialas. In January and February 1944, her nephew Lucien 14, and then his sister Jeanine, 16, both orphans, joined her too. Their mother has been arrested on the 10th of August in Bruyères (Vosges) and then deported on the 23rd of September (convoy n° 36). Their father died out of illness in March 1943. In May 1944, Lise Bloch, Rose Bloch’s daughter ended up in Vialas. She was an educator for children in a home in Saint Paul en Chablais (Haute Savoie) that belonged to the Oeuvre du Secours aux Enfants (OSE) which had to close up avoiding the risk for the children of being arrested.

Since October 1943, another family related to the Bloch-Simon, the Dockés-Oestreicher came to in the village. Germain and Josephine Dockés came from



Yvonne, André Bloch and their son, Gérard. (Vialas, March 15, 1944)

Gerardmer (Vosges). They were Suzanne Oestreicher’s parents with her husband Armand Oestreicher, a fabric dealer and their son Gabriel who was born in 1932. For six months, they have found temporary accommodation at the hotel Guin. Then, they rented a small house in Nojaret, nearby Vialas, at the so-called “Le Grenier”. Gabriel and Lucien went back to classes, to the Cours Complémentaire (high school) in Vialas. The Oestreichers introduced themselves as “refugees” who had fled from Nîmes in 1943. Armand Oestreicher was arrested by the Gestapo in Nîmes but he did not lose his self control even if he had to show he was circumcised, he was finally released. Fortunately, his identity card was not marked

“Jew” according to his son’s account.

⁷ His forged identity card has certainly been made by the Picard brothers, specialised in forged identity cards, members of the French local administration *Prefecture*, in Nîmes and members of the Resistance as well. The contact might have been made thanks to his in-law, Pierre Simon, who was involved in the Resistance movement.

A few family pictures including Jewish refugees were taken from the village on the 15th of March 1944. The instructions given by the school teacher from Souteyrannes for the population living in the surrounding hamlets, was to keep an eye on the school of Vialas. A hanged white sheet was the sign of danger as said by André Horvilleur, who was 16, in 1944. His family was well-known in the city of Nîmes because he owned famous men's clothes store "Raphaël habille bien". The family had come to shelter in Souteyrannes near Vialas, at the end of January 1944, thanks to the indication of Doctor Jeanjean who was living in the town of Genolhac, not far from it.

Nobody in the village was supposed to know of the identity of the refugees. In fact, it was difficult to conceal one's existence or one's origin. And we can merely use the word of semi-clandestinity regarding the situation. An exception could be made for one of the Escojido brothers, René who was hidden a full year in the Guin Hotel in the food supply reserve and who only would risk going out in order to get a meal at the boarding house Vignes-Guibal. His brother Raymond worked at the Hotel Guin. Both of them remained very unobtrusive.

If we recognized each other, -there was a population coming from Nimes fleeing the bombings or simply on holidays-, "we would not socialize because everyone lived on oneself and would hide." "If we met at the butcher's or at the baker's, we pretended to not know each other" as my parents told me. And according to Mrs Sylviane Escojido's testimony, Raymond's widow, when her husband was working in the hotel, nobody would say hello to him, they pretended not to know him. "The situation was insecure and we did not talk much to each other", René Evrard declared to me. He was the German teacher in the Vialas high school coming from Pfastatt, (Haut-Rhin) who had been appointed there since December 31, 1941."We were always scared of the informers or the betrayers". Therefore hiding, not to let the others know of your existence was a constant worry for the refugees. However a great number of families were aware of the reasons why they came to hide in Vialas. They also knew the risk they might run in lodging Jewish families. Gabriel remembers that in this closed environment, people did not show any sign of hostility.

What did happen on the 23rd of May 1944, the day of my birth?

According to my parent's statement, the militia has been spotted and they heard that it was heading to Vialas. As a matter of fact, in May 1944, the Commander-in- Chief of the police in the Region, Marty, has made up his mind to organize a

“cleansing operation” in deep secret in Lozère aiming at the camp of “terrorists” of Bouzédès, in particular, located nearby Vialas. Coming from Genolhac, on the night of the 23rd of May, the militia, the Groupes Mobiles de Reserve (GMR)⁸ and the German Army reached Vialas searching for illegal population, young fighters opposed to the Compulsory Work Service (STO). That night Gabriel remembered having seen an impressive military line of vehicles. According to Aimé Vielzeuf’s book, a resistant, author of “They Were Bandits”, 500 Germans and 600 policemen, militiamen, GMR headed to the village⁹. The figures looked excessive according to René Evrard. Doctor Jeanjean, a member of the Resistance, drove to Vialas from Genolhac to deliver my mother on the 23rd of May, in the morning, and left rapidly to avoid being arrested on his way back. My father found a refuge at Chaufés, his mother’s lodging, in the evening. On the next day, in the morning, the expedition searched the houses. They arrested a number of families who underwent questionings. The militia tried to find weapons, walked down to the Crépon farm where Richard, a member of the resistance, was living. They handled roughly Burnand, the protestant pastor, questioned “Paillasse”, the baker, and arrested Reydon, the butcher.¹⁰

The militiamen have been “well-informed” and required men and women suspected to meet at the town-hall. Among the inhabitants detained, we can list a great number of active members of the Resistance; among them, were Emile Carrière, Georges Soleyret, Alfred Quinsac, Francis Vidal, and the Pastor Burnand, according to René Evrard’s declaration. Madame Vignes, the present mayor’s mother was there too because militiamen and German soldiers were looking for her husband. Lisette Escogido was there too. She was suspected of hiding her two brothers who were opposed to the S.T.O. She was being lodged free by Miss Rauzier, an active member of the Resistance.

Thanks to the declaration of the mayor François Maurin stating that youngsters could not reside in the village because they did not find any work, they were liberated.¹¹ The population was scared that the village might be burnt out. The

⁸ Special police under the Vichy Regime.

⁹ A number of inhabitants in Vialas have mentioned a list of resistants in the village held by the militia during the operation.

¹¹ *Du Trenze au Luech*, special issue, *Vialas en Cévennes témoigne : 1940-1944*. René Evrard : In the town hall, Mr Maurin questioned by the Germans about the presence of young people living in the village, drove them near the window saying : “Young people, we don’t have any and it is quite sad. Look at the countryside and tell me how they could earn a living here? Nothing surprising if they have left for the city”.

German army positioned cannons at the top of the village at Libourette, according to André Platon's declaration, who was a member of the Resistance at that period, and was elected mayor of the village after war.

The 24th of May, in the morning, armed militiamen searched Francis Vidal's house. They started giving a blow at the back door of the house according to his son's memory. Robert was eight years old. My mother, my grand-mother and my brother were with me on the third level of the house. I was a one day old baby. We could reach the apartment by climbing two steep flights of steps; one was made with granite stone, the other one with wood. When Robert Vidal was questioned by the militia: "*What is it upstairs?*" showing the door leading to our rooms, Francis Vidal retorted quietly, they are attics. Francis was fully aware that my parents were Jewish and how much risk he took, according to his son's account to me. Vidal was convincing enough to persuade militiamen against climbing up to the last floor, asserting that the floor was rotten and that he himself never dared getting up there. Therefore, Francis Vidal kept my life safe as well as well as my family's thanks to his nerve and his cool-blooded attitude. He was a discreet man. I have very recently learnt that he was considered as what we called "a quiet father" of the French Resistance. My family did not know anything about it when they left Vialas, October 1944, following the liberation of Nimes which occurred on the 29th of August 1944.

Significant deeds revealed the support of the population in assisting the Jewish families of refugees: when my father declared my birth to the mayor, François Maurin, in order not to put my life in danger, guaranteed my father he would not publicize it on the wall of the town hall or in the local newspaper as he should have done. Therefore, we have survived thanks to a network of solidarity embodied by our lodger Francis Vidal, François Maurin, the mayor, and by the baker Paillasse who sold bread to my parents early in the morning without any ticket. In the Cévennes, in the village of Vialas in the surrounding areas, twenty Jewish families had found a refuge. It meant that about seventy five Jewish people coming from everywhere in Europe survived in the area. That means that Jewish refugees represents 8, 3 % of the town's population.

Thanks to the persuading quality of the mayor, thanks to the silence of the population, to the cautiousness of the underground fighters who had evacuated their camp and to the inhabitants informing them that they were approaching,

nobody has been arrested neither in the village nor in the surrounding farms. As René Evrard noticed during my last interview with him, “*The police have left the place without arresting anyone because they did not find anything, and if they had discovered you or **if you had cried**, they would have been even more suspicious and they would have chased again all over the place thinking the population was hiding other illegals*”.

Anny Bloch-Raymond, sociologist and writer.

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