

In the Mountains of Auvergne

France, 2017

Once again, I was on my way back to Auvergne, to the hidden home of my early years. Exhausted from the transatlantic flight, I rested my head on John's shoulder — John, my loving and devoted partner. We have done many expeditions to France, the land of my origin. I listened to the rattle of the train and watched the green fields fly by. It was on such a train that I first came to Auvergne, in 1943, still an infant in the arms of a woman. My mind drifted back. *She was a stranger. I sensed her apprehension. I was restless and fretful. Then I drifted off. I felt a jolt. The stranger holding me was talking to two men. They asked questions. She showed papers. I sensed her fear — but the men passed on.*

As I grew up, I forgot that voyage, forgot the green farmlands and hills of Auvergne, and forgot the French language, my mother tongue. I left France as a child and I vowed never to return. I wanted to erase those bitter years. But now, revisiting Auvergne after seventy-two years, I knew that I owed everything to this region — not only my life but its direction and its pervading sense of purpose.

The train slowed to a halt in Clermont-Ferrand, Auvergne's main city, an industrial metropolis in a farming region. The handsome station, built in white stone just after my departure so long ago, opens onto a wide thoroughfare, Avenue de l'Union Soviétique, named in tribute to France's great wartime ally against Hitlerism. Scores of streets bear names of heroes of the anti-Nazi Resistance. Some five thousand Jews found refuge from the Nazi Holocaust in this city, and thousands more — including me — in the surrounding region. After the Nazi army was expelled in 1944, the city was awarded a medal, France's Croix de guerre, for its record of resistance.

After a night's rest, John and I drove through a long valley and then up narrow winding roads into the hills. *Mon mari*, John Riddell, master of logistics, had chosen the tiny village of Chalinargues for a few days of rest. We walked to breakfast in a small café that provided me with *café crème* and *tartines*.

The town is home to 250 citizens and just as many cows. Announced by the

clattering of bells hanging from their necks, they paraded down the main street on their leisurely way to pasture. Vehicles and pedestrians alike gave way. Farmsteads were lodged within the village itself in handsome old two-storey stone buildings containing both living area and barn. *Perhaps the spot where I was hidden during the war was much like this*, I thought.

John and I arrived in France at a crucial moment. It was during the French presidential elections and Emmanuel Macron, a “centrist” candidate, was in contest with Marine Le Pen. Her right-wing party, notorious for its hostility to immigrants, is widely viewed as standing in continuity with the wartime pro-fascist French government that colluded with the German Nazis. The evil actions of that regime, headquartered in Vichy in the north end of Auvergne, had a hand in shaping my personal fate.

The Vichy regime ruled after the Nazi German defeat of French armies in 1940. The German army occupied the north of the country; Vichy, in political alignment with the Nazis, ruled the south. Vichy authorities persecuted the Jews and helped implement the Nazi Holocaust, rounding up Jews for the death trains. The Nazis murdered 73,500 Jewish and some 30,000 Roma “deportees” from France plus untold other *Untermenschen* (“sub-humans”) — a death toll in the tens of millions across Europe. When I was taken to Auvergne by train as an infant, it was the Vichy police whose inspectors put my life in the balance.

These events of long ago were in my mind as the 2017 presidential vote took place. John and I cheered when we heard the good news: Le Pen was soundly defeated. The Jewish community in Clermont-Ferrand had requested that I come to their city to speak to high-school classes and give press interviews on my experience as a Jewish child rescued by an Auvergne farming community. My Jewish hosts would also be celebrating the Le Pen defeat.

During our stay in Chalinargues I practised the French-language text that I was to present several times, and also prepared for discussions and interviews, in which my entire life would be on review. An Auvergne journalist wrote that I had “lived many lives during my 75 years.” Very true. I had taken a battering during my childhood years that left its mark on me. My life took shape as a quest to heal wounds of wartime trauma and seek links with communities striving for social justice. My direction was set during that time in Auvergne as a child in the care of the anti-Nazi Resistance.