

## A City of Refuge

For the people of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon in Southern France, providing a refuge for Jewish children and their families during World War II was as natural as breathing. Though surrounded by those who had the power to destroy them, this “tiny impoverished Huguenot village” did what they knew to be right.

At great risk to themselves, this small “city of refuge” helped save the lives of some 5,000 refugees from the Nazis, most of them Jews, by hiding them in their homes and nearby Catholic convents and monasteries.

These Protestant Huguenots knew what it meant to be persecuted. Persecution was part of their history, too, and they drew on that history as well as their deep and practical understanding of biblical teaching to form this caring response to those who were suffering and whose lives were at stake. Carved above their church entrance were the simple words, “Love one another.”

Philip P. Hallie, who tells their story in *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*, says that about a year after he first learned of their story, he was walking down a country road with one of the leaders of the rescue operation. He asked him whether he hated the Germans. “He put his big hand on my shoulder,” Hallie says, “pulled me to a stop, looked into my eyes and said, ‘Oh no! We did not hate them! We loved them. We wanted to rescue them from doing more evil. Oh yes, we wanted to rescue them as well as the children.’”

Their pastor, Andre Trocme, was moved by the Old Testament concept of sanctuary. The sanctuary-keeper had a “heavy responsibility,” as Hallie summarizes. “It states that if the refugee is killed, the sanctuary-keeper is guilty of bloodshed, as if he himself had killed the refugee. This stringent demand was an important part of Andre Trocme’s commitment to protect the refugees. He would protect them with all his heart and soul.”

In February of 1943, Andre, together with another minister and a school teacher, was arrested. “All of a sudden, as if from nowhere,” Hallie writes, “dozens of villagers lined the crooked little street outside the Presbytery and sang the old Lutheran hymn, ‘A Mighty Fortress is our God,’ while the police left the Presbytery with their prisoners. And as the police and the leaders left the cobbled street and turned right toward the village square, the villagers closed behind them singing their calm, deeply rooted song. Their wooden shoes made clop-clop sounds that were muffled a little by a thin snow.”

Soon, however, they were released, for reasons still unknown. And after a homecoming celebrated by hundreds “in the big square, silent and joyful,” they continued their work.

“Goodness without rancor toward anyone can save lives as surely as guns can,” Hallie concludes. “And it can require at least as much courage as a military attack.”

Further reading: Philip Hallie, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*, New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1979.

Video: "Weapons of the Spirit"

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