**“The concentration of 12,000 Jews in the closed stadium created a horrifying and demonic scene, a scene that seizes you by the throat and does not let you shout out […] The emotional situation is indescribable: hysterical cries of “let us go,” attempted suicides, some come to us and beg “Kill us, don’t leave us here…” Not a single German can be seen on the horizon – the cowards leave the dirty work to the French! […] When we came out – social workers and nurses – the responsible official told us, “Whatever happens, you are prohibited to say a word outside about what you saw here.”**

From: Asher Cohen, *The History of the Holocaust – France*, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem 5756, p. 297 (Hebrew).

This testimony, which describes the terrible suffering of the Jews imprisoned in the Winter Velodrome in Paris in July 1942, was published at the time and distributed in tens of thousands of copies. It reflects the complexity of the persecution and annihilation of the Jews in France.

Various factors influenced the German’s plan to annihilate all the Jews of France and determined their fate over the four years of German occupation in the country: The clear distinction between veteran and well-established French-born Jews and foreign Jews who had immigrated to the country between the two world wars; the issue of the collaboration between the French Vichy regime and German interests regarding the Final Solution of the Jews of France; French public opinion; the help provided to Jews by non-Jewish French citizens during these years; and the extensive underground rescue actions conducted by French and Jews. All these make the story of the French Jews during the Second World War a unique chapter in the history of the Holocaust of European Jewry.

This issue of Zika will address this subject from several perspectives: A historical review of the Holocaust of the French Jews and an article about the Jewish resistance present the highly complex nature of the persecution of the Jews in France during the war; an interview with members of the Alumim association describes the important work of this organization of survivors who were held in hiding in France during the Holocaust; while another interview with Dora Weinberger, a Holocaust survivor from France, exposes the personal side of life in occupied France.

The Jewish Resistance Movement in France

“Every Jew in France clearly understands that the only step that can ensure the salvation of the Jewish people depends on a man’s fight, for life or death, between us and the Hitlerians. This alone will ensure the survival of the Jewish people […] We must create more and more companies of the Communist underground. We will attack the enemy wherever it is to be found; we will embitter its life; we will destroy its communication means and shut down its war machine. We will participate in the daily fighting that leads to national uprising.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

(*Kolenu*, May-June 1943)

The call to go to war through an armed struggle against the Germans, as published in *Kolenu*, one of the journals of the Jewish Community Resistance in the spring of 1943, would seem to be a particularly interesting phenomenon. It presents the complexity of Jewish identity, at least from the Communist angle. We might ostensibly expect that the Communist discourse would be universal in character, addressing the general goals of the Resistance. Yet the short text before us calls for a war to “ensure the survival of the Jewish people” and to take part in the Resistance as part of national uprising. The Jewish angle appears to have been influenced by the news from Poland about the revolt in the Warsaw Ghetto. What, though, were the circumstances that led the Communists to Jewish discourse? From what Jewish groups did the combatants come? What was the character of this resistance? In this brief historical review, I will try to answer these questions and to present the complex case of the Jewish resistance within the context of the French Resistance.

In general, when discussing the actions of the Resistance, and particularly the Jewish underground movements, it is difficult to distinguish between rescue actions and resistance actions. Unlike Eastern Europe, where the underground movements were usually separated between rescue and resistance, with a few exceptions (such as the family camp of the Bielsky brothers), the perception of Jewish resistance in France was different. The Jewish underground groups worked first of all to rescue Jews, based on the approach that Jewish resistance just first and foremost defend Jewish lives. With the exception of the Jewish Communists, whose operating orders came from Moscow and whose brave resistance actions were directly primarily against German targets, most of the Jewish groups in the Resistance acted to secure Jewish goals.

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In May 1940 France surrendered to German occupation after a short battle. A month later, France was divided into two areas. The North – the Occupied Zone – was subject to German military rule, while the South – the Free Zone – was under the control of the Vichy government, headed by Marshal Pétain, a hero of the First World War. Naturally, the exacerbation in anti-Jewish legislation and policy was reflected mainly in the North, and initially target foreign Jews, those who were not “*Israélites*” – longstanding French citizens who followed the religion of Moses. This policy heightened the internal tension between the Jewish groups and had far-reaching ramifications. Following the deterioration in the conditions in the Occupied Zone, many Jews fled to the South in the hope of finding refuge. However, in November 1942 the German occupation was extended over the Free Zone and the situation facing the Jews deteriorated still further. Even before this date, in the spring of 1942, Jews were deported from France to the extermination camps in Eastern Europe – firstly from Drancy near Paris, then from the other detention camps in the Occupied Zone, and from the summer of 1942 also from detention camps in the South. By this stage, both foreign and native Jews were being arrested and deported. The deportations were undertaken with the assistance of the French authorities, the police, and the Vichy regime. The testimonies and horrors of the detentions and deportations became known to the French public and were received with shock; the popular reaction enabled the Resistance to expand its operations.

The Résistance, as the underground opposition was known in France, was born in 1940 in response to the German occupation. Its operations were initially confined mainly to disseminating underground newspapers. From 1941 the Resistance acquired a broad dimension and became a phenomenon that can be divided into four stages: The entry of the Soviet Union into the war in 1941, leading the Communists to go underground; the direct links between the Communist movement and the Free France movement;[[2]](#footnote-2) the occupation of the South by the Germans; and the “obligatory work service in the Reich” order[[3]](#footnote-3) for non-Jewish French people, which was received with anger among the French public.

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**The Resistance Movement in the North – The Occupied Zone**

The different character of the regime in the North and South of France influenced the operations of the Jewish resistance in both zones. In general, until 1942 various rescue organizations were involved in underground actions focusing on assistance to refugees, concealment, and the smuggling of people (mainly children) to the South of France. One of the most prominent organizations established following the occupation by Jewish migrants was based in Paris, on Rue Amelot, after which it was named. Rue Amelot sought to assist migrants and had relatively good access to resources, thanks to its links with UGIF, the official body of French Jews, which was recognized by the authorities. Rue Amelot fully understood the gravity of the situation, particularly as far as migrant Jews were concerned. The organization rapidly adapted to the new situation and operated in an informal manner. Its efforts focused on providing social assistance through soup kitchens and clinics. However, it refrained from underground operations due to concern that this could harm its primary activities. Its policy was to help any Jew who asked for assistance, including financial aid, without imposing bureaucratic questions (contrary to other organizations, particularly UGIF). Following the waves of detentions in the summer of 1942 and threats to imprison the heads of the organization, the offices on Rue Amelot were closed. During the same period, the staff of the organization received certificates from UGIF, thereby enabling the organization to continue its activities. While Rue Amelot had until now operated in a semi-legal manner, it changed its method of operations and went underground. After the deportations to the East began, the financial support and official status provided by UGIF provided Rue Amelot with tools enabling it to smuggle prisoners out of the camps and move them to the South, with the help of forged documents.[[4]](#footnote-4)

As the situation deteriorated, many children were placed in children’s homes and orphanages made available to UGIF in and around Paris. The 400 beds available to the organization were insufficient to cope with the large number of children left unattended and unsupervised following the waves of detentions in Paris in July 1942. Some children managed to escape during the detention operations, others were freed from Drancy, and others still hid with relatives, friends, or neighbors and passers-by who could no longer continue to accommodate them. An absurd situation emerged: since the German authorities were still waiting for instructions from Berlin regarding the handling of the children, UGIF asked that they be placed under its care. Despite the acute need for institutional frameworks for the children, UGIF’s hostels could not provide a solution, since the organization maintained lists of the children held in the facilities and these were revealed to the Germans. Serious difficulties emerged regarding the “blocked children” – 200 children released from Drancy by the German SD at the request of UGIF who faced the danger of deportation. Thus organizations such as OSE, Solidarité, and Rue Amelot faced a new task. Over one thousand children were moved to non-Jewish frameworks, families or institutions. The Mouvement National contre le Racisme (MNCR),[[5]](#footnote-5) whose members were Protestant and Catholic Communists, played a central role in saving the children. In most cases, children were removed from the UGIF hostels by a non-Jewish woman who cared for them for several days, until documents confirming their Aryan status were prepared. They were then transferred to an adoptive family in rural areas by members of the MNCR. The smuggling of children and the preparation of the new identity required the involvement of numerous individuals – priests, municipal clerks, and activists in the organizations. Rue Amelot closely monitored the relocated children through regular visits to the families, who were supposed to receive a monthly stipend, although in many cases this was delayed and the payment was not made. OSE transferred hundreds of children to isolated farms in the South, where the children helped to provide for the adoptive families. Their names were encrypted in hidden lists and they were visited occasionally by social workers. These concealment operations received financial assistance from UGIF and the accounts were forged due to fear of auditing operations.[[6]](#footnote-6) In general, it can be stated that the first rescue operations were launched by Jews, while later non-Jews provided support and took enormous risks, acting from humanitarian or religious motives. On more than one occasion, a child was saved thanks to the kindness of a stranger, usually a women who was present on the scene by pure chance:

“In July I was present when the police cruelly dragged Jewish families into three buses. An astonishing sight! […] I knew almost all of them superficially […]. One woman gestured to me and asked me to approach: ‘Madame, please, take my little daughter. She won’t be afraid to leave me with you. I don’t want here to be with me because I sense that we are being led to our death.’ The little girl gave me her hand and came home with me. I did what seemed to me to be obvious.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Substantial news of the extermination reached the Resistance at a relatively late point. In November 1942, the Communist organization Solidarité received news that 11,000 Jews had been exterminated by gas in Auschwitz; the information was provided by a Polish Community in the camp. After much prevarication, the members of the organization published the information, while emphasizing the number of those killed rather than the method used. The members of Rue Amelot found it hard to believe the reports and suspected that they were Communist propaganda. Similar reports had been received earlier, in the summer, by the Consistoire, and probably also by UGIF, but they preferred to keep these silent.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Before moving on to a review of the situation in the South, it is worth noting the difference between the developments in and around Paris and those in the North of France. Not even a single Jewish organization maintained a presence in the North, including UGIF. The task of saving Jews was left to the Jews themselves and to their surroundings. In most cases help was provided by Catholics, and even more so by Protestants, who themselves had a past of persecution and identified with the Jews. Religious and civil institutions saved Jews, but in many cases private individuals also opened up their hearts and their homes. The Resistance movements in the North focused on general goals and did not address the Jewish issue, perhaps because there were few Jewish fighters in their ranks. After the wave of detentions in Paris in the summer of 1943, members of the Jewish-Communist group Main d’Oeuvre Immigrée[[9]](#footnote-9) came to reinforce the Communist underground in the North. As elsewhere in France, the underground in the North suffered from losses, and Jews were deported to Eastern Europe.[[10]](#footnote-10)

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**The Resistance Movement in the South – The Free Zone**

In 1940, David Knout, an immigrant from Eastern Europe, called for the establishment of a secret fighting organization to unite the Jews and prevent them becoming the victims of mass murder, and to promote the goal of a Jewish state in the Land of Israel. In January 1942, together with Lucien Lublin, another immigrant and refugee from Eastern Europe, he published the manifesto of the Jewish Army,[[11]](#footnote-11) which was a unique Jewish underground from the moment it was founded:[[12]](#footnote-12)

“The Jewish people is facing a danger unlike anything it has faced in its long history […]. Anti-Semitism has gained strength and efficiency over the past 50 years, to the point that in our day it has become an international movement, scientifically organized, and armed over everyone else. Its plan, to annihilate the Jewish people, is already in the stages of its implementation.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

It might seem that this manifesto forecasts the future and was ahead of its time, in a manner similar to the proclamation issued by Abba Kovner at the same time, urging members of the youth movements in Vilna not to go as lambs to the slaughter and to oppose the Germans with force. However, there is almost certainly a substantive difference between the manifesto and the proclamation. Historian Asher Cohen argues that unlike the members of the youth movements and underground in Vilna, the members of the Jewish Army in France did not have any early information about what was happening in the East. Accordingly, their forecast of annihilation was a hunch or “poetic license,” though it was certainly based on an element of logic.[[14]](#footnote-14)

The aspiration of the two young immigrants was realized, albeit after a delay, and the Jewish Army joined the armed struggle in 1943. Its members included activists from the Jewish Scouts and young Zionists. As it began its military actions, the group suffered from a shortage of equipment and connections. However, following the developments in Nice in the same year (see below), the organization proved its ability both to save Jews and to eliminate collaborators through the use of guerrilla warfare. In Nice alone, the Jewish underground lost 45 of its fighters. The organization was also active in the North. Its theaters of operation were chosen for various reasons, including the desire to help and accompany Jews seeking to cross the border into Spain. In June 1944, the Jewish Army became the Fighting Jewish Organization (OJC),[[15]](#footnote-15) and its operation logs provide details about its activities.[[16]](#footnote-16)

The OJC undertook a total of 1,925 operations, including 750 acts of sabotage against railroad infrastructures, leading to the destruction of 705 engines. The activists also destroyed 32 factories that were participating in the occupation’s war effort and 25 more were seriously damaged. Bridges were blown up and collapsed and 152 members of the enemy militia were executed, including General Philippin, a militia member who spied for the Germans. The OJC undertook 175 operations against Germans and 1,085 enemy soldiers were killed in battle or executed during these operations. In addition, the Wehrmacht lost seven airplanes exploded on the ground, 286 trucks, and over two million liters of fuel.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Naturally, not all the OJC’s operations were successful. More than once its fighters paid with their lives, as in the case of Maurice Loebenberg Cachoud, commander of the underground, who was also responsible for forging documents for additional underground movements. Cachoud was captured and tortured cruelly before his execution. Unsurprisingly, the most activist organization was that of the Communists,[[18]](#footnote-18) including the FTP-MOI, most of whose members were Jews. This group constituted the major part of the underground in the South. Its units attacked German targets, hotels, means of transportation, vehicle repair shops, and places of entertainment. Although its members were motivated mainly by their Jewish identity, and risked their lives bravely, their operating instructions came from the Communist Party, as noted above, and accordingly their actions did not specifically target those who were persecuting the Jews (such as attacking individuals responsible for the deportations to Auschwitz). However, the Communists played a crucial role in rescuing Jewish children and also engaged in propaganda, urging “every French family to take in one persecuted child.” They also provided the public with guidance in ways to oppose the deportations:[[19]](#footnote-19)

“What can you do not to fall into the hands of the German murderers? What can you do to accelerate their despite and save everyone’s liberty? Here is how every Jew, man or woman, should act […]: Don’t wait at home for the bandits. Use every means possible to hide. As a first step, attend to the children’s safety and hide them with the help of the French population that feels a sense of partnership. To ensure your own safety, join a patriotic organization to fight and strike the bloodthirsty enemy […]. Look for every possible way to escape.”[[20]](#footnote-20)

As mentioned, after the Soviet Union joined the war, the Communists and the other members of the Resistance ostensibly shared a common goal, although the Communists’ actions often led to collective punishments and were the subject of fierce criticism. It is important to emphasize that the Jewish Communists also acted to save Jews, but their actions were first and foremost as Communists. At the beginning of 1943, they were the only element ready to fight among all the Jewish underground groups in the South. The news of the Warsaw Ghetto revolt became a model and emblem. The Jewish Community newspapers urged people to stop waiting and to engage in forceful resistance to the occupier, drawing inspiration from the revolt, which formed “a link in the historical chain of wars waged by the Jews for the sake of Jewish national existence.” After sustaining numerous detentions over the winter of the same year, the Jewish Communists sought to create Jewish unity. In July 1943 contacts began between the members of the underground movements and political organizations in the South. Communists, Socialists, and Zionists agreed to work together to provide social assistance, but disagreements emerged regarding the armed struggle, due to fear of collective punishment. A compromise was eventually reached and the General Committee for the Defense of the Jews (CGD) was established.[[21]](#footnote-21) It was agreed that the armed groups would not operate under the CJD but that they would receive financial aid. It should be noted that over the course of 1943 the head of UGIF and the head of the Consistoire in the South were arrested and later deported to Auschwitz. This action appears to have encouraged Jewish unity due to the weakening of the status of the official organizations.[[22]](#footnote-22)

After the Communists lost hundreds of their fighters in the South over the summer, some of their leaders were sent to Paris, where they sought to revive the underground and establish a unified Jewish organization along the lines of the CJD. In order to achieve the desired cooperation, two difficulties had to be overcome: the change in the attitude of the “Israélites” toward the immigrants and suspicion about UGIF. In January 1944, unity was achieved in Paris and the United Defense Committee was established, including representatives of the youth movements and organizations representing migrant and veteran Jews, including UGIF. Over the coming months, the SD shut down UGIF’s offices in the South, although the organization’s activists continued their rescue operations until the end of the occupation out of concern for the lives of Jews dependent on their help. The Committee’s approach remained unchanged: it was concerned firstly with attending to the wellbeing of Jews, and only secondarily with the armed struggle. In practice, while in the South the Zionist youth movements and the Jewish Scouts joined the fighting as part of the Armée Juive, in Paris the Communist organization was left alone in the armed struggle.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Most of the rescue operations in the South were undertaken by the “networks”[[24]](#footnote-24) and the youth movements. As in Eastern Europe, the transition from a youth movement to an underground was far from simple, though the reasons for the crisis in France were different. Until mid-1942, the youth movements concentrated mainly on education and on consolidating Jewish identity. Their first illegal actions emerged against the background of the arrests and deportations. It could be argued that the idealistic and educational orientation of the movements, which had consolidated over the first few years of the occupation, was an important factor in their readiness to engage in rescue operations at great personal risk. The Jewish Scouts, the Zionist Youth Movement, and the Alliance of Religious Pioneers were the most prominent movements in the underground activities. The Jewish Scouts, who formed part of the French Scouting movement and enjoyed state support, regarded France as their homeland and its leaders were members of UGIF. Thus the members of the movement faced a moral dilemma that was resolved due to the reality on the ground following their first illegal actions to save children. The cooperation between the organizations developed: they shared information about impending arrests and warned Jews in advance. The precedent of the siege at the Winter Velodrome in Paris and the cooperation and sharing of information between the networks and the youth movements facilitated the rescue efforts. Following the deportations to the Netherlands, these activities were intensified. At this stage the Dutch movement Hechalutz, with the assistance of Dutch underground fighters and members of the Zionist underground in France, began to smuggle children from the Netherlands through Belgium to Free France, and then on to Spain or Switzerland. After the Germans took control of the South, the illegal activities of the youth movements centered on the production, use, and distribution of forged documents.[[25]](#footnote-25)

The Church and its clerics played an important role in the rescue operations in the South. Leading figures in the Church cooperated with the underground and were trusted completely. In addition to recruiting Christian institutions – Catholic or Protestant – to help hide Jews (mainly children), bishops and priests also urged their faithful to take part in such activities. In some cases, an entire village volunteered to help. The best-known example is Le chambon sur Lignon,[[26]](#footnote-26) where an underground was also active. Municipal officials or clerks sometimes played a key role in saving Jews in their area, as in the case of Saint Germain de Calberte[[27]](#footnote-27) or Fay sur Lignon.[[28]](#footnote-28)

The networks that worked with the Church were always strictly separated and took extreme cautionary steps in order to protect the lives of the children and those who did them, but also in order to record the children’s true identity in preparation for liberation. The activists undertook great risks, but the most important and dangerous function was filled by the women who supervised the children. Their function was to maintain constant contact with the children and to attend to such technical matters as documents, stipends, and ration cards. Most of the women were young members of the Jewish youth movements, although non-Jewish women from the underground who cooperated with the Jewish underground were also involved.[[29]](#footnote-29)

In contrast to the concealment operations, which due to the reality on the ground focused mainly on children, families also crossed the borders with the help of members of the networks and the youth movements. The smugglers relied on help from locals, many of whom were members of the Church. Some of those who helped in these actions did so on their own initiative. The destination varied according to the circumstances: Before the German occupation of Italy, the country was the preferred target of smuggling activities. In some areas the conditions were so harsh that those fleeing were required to spend two to five days walking across the mountain peaks – something that only young people could withstand.[[30]](#footnote-30)

During the period from November 1942 through September 1943, Nice was under Italian occupation. Many Jews fled to the city, which at one point was home to some 30,000 Jews. The Jewish aid organizations cooperated to alleviate the conditions facing the many refugees, some of whom were dispersed in Italian centers in the area. The youth movements also felt more confident operating in the zone of Italian occupation and documents prepared by forgers in this area were then smuggled into the German-occupied areas. In September 1943, however, the situation changed. Following the German losses in North Africa, German units arrived in the city, followed by the Gestapo, and Nice therefore became a cruel trap for the local Jews and the refugees. The French police in Nice refused to cooperate with the deportations, so that the Gestapo hunted veteran and migrant Jews with the help of local collaborations (“physiognomistes.”) At a certain stage Nice was encircled and the Gestapo controlled access to and from the city. Nevertheless, thousands of Jews managed to march to Italy, despite the risks involved. Many of those who escaped were arrested at railroad stations or on buses. Unlike the legal Jewish organizations (such as UGIF), whose actions were constrained, the youth movements continued to provide assistance and forged documents on an enormous scale. In addition to their involvement in the rescue operations, young Jewish members also took up arms, assassinating collaborators and informers and attacking their leaders, thereby leading to a decline in the scale of such collaboration. The Germans eventually managed to capture around 2,000 Jews, all of whom were transferred to Drancy and then on to Auschwitz. Nice is an example of the ineffectiveness of the persecutors in the face of an efficient Jewish underground that operated in the city on the broadest and most successful scale seen in France.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Following the Normandy landing, France became a battlefield. In addition to the Armée Juive, other Jewish organizations took part in the battles as distinct Jewish groups, including the Communist FTP-MOI and Solidarité. In the South, Jewish units also joined the rebel forces and helped carry out attacks against the occupying army in Lyon, Toulouse, Marseille, and Grenoble. Many of the Jewish fighters were foreign Jews who fought bravely and heroically in the South and even in the North. In February 1944, the Germans executed the “Group of 23” in Paris – Resistance activists who were arrested. Of the 23 fighters executed, 12 were Jews, all of them migrants.[[32]](#footnote-32)

One of the broadsheets published in March 1944 by the Union of Jews for Resistance and Aid[[33]](#footnote-33) reflects a trend that expanded and intensified as liberation approached. After the Jews had been isolated and excluded from broader French society through terror and violence, they sought in their publications to emphasize their contribution to the national struggle for liberation, recalling as they did so the splendid relations between Jews and French since the French Revolution. At the same time, it appears that they exempted the French people from liability for the crimes committed by its leaders. As the historian Renée Poznansky accurately notes, this position would later change. Above all, however, they sought to present a united Jewish front to French society – one that sought to maintain the internal unity it had consolidated after years of mistrust and fierce arguments between “Israélites” and immigrants. This unity reflected a substantive change in the Jewish community that would continue to apply after the Holocaust under the auspices of the Representative Council of the Jewish Institutions of France (CRIF), [[34]](#footnote-34) whose origins lie in the united Jewish front that emerged toward the end of the war:[[35]](#footnote-35)

“Yes, Jews – French and migrant alike – are fighting shoulder to shoulder with the entire French people and took part in the liberation of France. […] Within the broad context of the French Resistance, they may perhaps constitute only a modest sub-group […], but they are doing their duty and they are doing so fully. As Frenchmen, they are setting an example to their immigrant brethren, repaying their debt of gratitude. […] The blood of the Jewish fighters spilt on the soil of France mingles every day with the generous blood of the best sons of the French nation […]. Thanks to this partnership of sacrifice, this partnership of struggle by all the oppressed against the cruel tyrant who is oppressing the nations and all the free people, a new land will be born tomorrow – a land that will once again be a shining land of liberty for the whole world; a land that will ensure the equal rights of all its children.”[[36]](#footnote-36)

The Holocaust of the French Jews – A Historical Review

Liraz Lachmanowitz

Map of Occupied France

The history of the Jews in France during the Holocaust and the Second World War constitutes an unique and complex chapter in the history of the Holocaust of European Jewry. Various factors combined to create a different reality than in the other countries under German occupation. These include the internal division of the Jewish community between veteran Jews and immigrants; the French Vichy regime and its collaboration with German interests relating to the persecution of the Jews; public opinion among the civilian population; and the underground and rescue actions by Jews and non-Jews. The following review will focus on these historical processes and events.

Following the First World War, France was regarded as the strongest power in Europe. However, despite its military achievements, it suffered from serious domestic problems, including a dwindling population, political instability, and the rise of extremist forces on both sides of the political map. Together with the growing military strength of Germany, these factors led toward the end of the 1930s to France’s ultimate surrender of the fortified Maginot Line and to the signing of a ceasefire agreement between Germany and France on 22 June 1940. About a month later, the members of the French parliament decided to abolish the republican regime in France and to grant full powers to Marshal Henri Pétain, who thus became “the head of the French state.” According to the ceasefire agreement, France was divided into five zones: a small area along the northeastern border was annexed to the Belgian military government; an area in the southeast was handed to Italian rule; and Alsace-Lorraine was annexed to Germany. The two remaining zones, comprising the majority of the territory of France, were divided between France and Germany:

The Occupied Zone, under German rule, included the West, North, and East of the country, including Paris. The Free Zone, which was under the control of the new government of Marshal Phillip Pétain and his deputy Pierre Lavale, included all the South of the country, including the city of Vichy, where the government was based. Pétain was perceived at the time not merely as a leader but as a redeeming messiah who would free France from its condition and lead to national renewal. His policies were accepted by almost all sections of French society and enjoyed firm support from political quarters that adhered to contradictory ideologies. Bolstered by the nationalists’ demand “to give France back to the French,” the Vichy regime presented its new principles – work, family, homeland – and began to reduce the influence of foreigners and to curtail the rights of refugees and Jews. This approach fitted in well with the broader agenda of French society, which was rife with anti-Semitism and xenophobia. During its first year, opposition to Pétain’s rule was confined to a very small group within French society.

The Jews of France were scattered at the time in thousands of locales and rural areas. Approximately one-third of them held French citizenship – natives of the country who were also referred to as “Israélites.” The remainder were Jews who had emigrated to France from Eastern Europe around the end of the nineteenth century, or from Germany during the 1930s. They were regarded as “foreign Jews” or immigrants. After Hitler’s rise to power, thousands of Jewish refugees fled from the Reich to France, settling mainly in Paris, which accordingly was home to two-thirds of the country’s Jewish population by the outbreak of the Second World War. In May 1940 the population of foreign Jews increased further after some 40,000 Jews fled from the Western European countries occupied by the Germans, such as Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg. Accordingly, it is estimated that the number of Jews in France at the beginning of the occupation was around 350,000, over half of whom were stateless. The veteran Jews regarded Pétain and his government as a legitimate and reliable authority that could help rehabilitate France following its defeat. By contrast, the foreign Jews refused to place trust in a government that was collaborating with the Nazi occupier. This division between Jews with French citizenship and foreigners was stark and evident, both within the community and to the regime. Indeed, the distinction would later become fateful, since Jews with French citizenship initially enjoyed protection, and the differences between the two groups widened considerably.

The occupation of France, May 1940

Following the occupation and partition of France, millions of French people fled to the Free Zone in the South, including large numbers of Jews who began to attempt to reorganize their lives under German occupation and the Vichy regime. As time passed, the policies of the Vichy government became increasingly harsh. Throughout this period, the Jews were forced to cope with a new system of hostile laws, accompanied by unprecedented anti-Semitism encouraged by the government. In order to supervise the implementation of anti-Jewish actions and laws, Theodor Danker, an SS officer from Eichmann’s staff, was sent to France. He was given responsibility for anti-Semitic policy and reported to Eichmann’s office in Berlin. At the same time, the Vichy regime also initiated independent actions against the Jews. In July 1940, a law was enacted calling for an inspection of the naturalization of immigrants. In accordance with the law, some 16,000 immigrants, over one-third of whom were Jews, lost their citizenship. In addition, all persons who were not “French by birth” were expelled from the public administration and were forbidden to work as physicians or attorneys. Three months later, in October 1940, the Vichy regime published the Law on the Status of the Jews, which essentially reversed the emancipation granted to the Jews of French and defined Jewish status in accordance with a racial criterion. The Jews were subsequently denuded of their civil rights and their property, dismissed from the civil service, and expelled from their businesses. Tens of thousands of businesses and thousands of apartments were confiscated from Jewish and Jewish physicians lost their titles. The goal of the law was to purify the civil service, the education system, the media, the cinema and theater, and the officer ranks of the military of Jews. During the same month, numerous laws were published excluding the Jews still further from French society. These included the law for the “Aryanization” of Jewish property in the Occupied Zone. As noted, the main victims of anti-Jewish policy during this stage were foreign Jews, rather than those who held French citizenship. Thousands of Jewish migrants were placed in forced labor camps or detained in camps established throughout France.

Anti-Semitic propaganda poster, France

Throughout the war, numerous concentration and incarceration camps operated in France, both in the Occupied Zone and in the zone under the control of Vichy. These camps formed the first link in the chain of deportation of the Jewish population in the country to its death. The largest camps were situated in Southwest France and were established as early as 1939, serving for the incarceration of migrants and refugees. At the beginning of 1941, the population of the camps in the South reached a peak, with almost 40,000 Jewish prisoners alone. At first the War Ministry was charged with responsibility for supervising the camps, but at the end of 1940 they were transferred to the Interior Ministry. The formal guidelines for the management of the camps were reasonable, but in practice the living conditions in them were extremely harsh. The concentration camps were an initiative of the Vichy government and the assistance provided by various aid organizations were part of the framework permitted by the authorities.

Drancy Camp, France

In January 1940, Danker established the Coordinating Committee of Relief Organizations in France, which brought together most of the Jewish relief bodies, both those of French Jews and those of foreigners. In 1941, he established two additional important institution. In March the General Office for Jewish Affairs in France (the “Commissary”) was established, serving as the main body for coordinating anti-Jewish actions and legislation. This body, most of whose staff were anti-Semites, prepared the legislative infrastructure for the isolation of the Jews. Government ministries and even private businesspeople turned to the Commissary to seek guidance regarding their contacts with Jews. The staff of this body later engaged in systemic propaganda against the Jews and participated in the process of “Aryanization.” Approximately sixth months later, in November 1941, after the relief organizations of the Jewish migrants withdrew from the Coordinating Committee, Danker decided to form a compulsory central body for all the remaining Jewish bodies, with the exception of the institutions included in the Consistoire., This was the background to the founding of the General Union of Israelites of France – UGIF. From the German perspective, UGIFD was intended to serve as a central and subordinate Jewish leadership along the lines of the Judenrats in Poland, with the goal if supervising the Jews’ activities and communal affairs. UGIF reflected both the German desire and the French interest in ensuring the presence of a national body responsible for all Jewish affairs, under the supervision of the Commissary – i.e. under government control. The establishment of this body encountered opposition both from the “Israélites,” who saw it as a further step in their exclusion from the French nation to which they fervently felt they belonged, and the Jewish migrants, who were extremely concerned that the body would be similar to those they had heard about in Eastern Europe, and moreover that it would be run solely by French Jews. In reality, UGIF did not fulfill the primary function intended by the Germans, but rather served as a large social assistance body. Although it was a single institution, in practice UGIF comprised two separate organizations. In the North, it was a centralized unit working with other migrant organizations that refused to cooperate with it and were established in opposition to the Consistoire. In the South, UGIF was solely a relief and social aid organization. Later UGIF also worked underground and took part in effort to rescue Jews, produce forged documents, and so forth.

From the summer of 1941, the French people began to show dissatisfaction with the Vichy regime and its collaboration with the German authorities. Despite expressions of disagreement, however, the Vichy government continued to strengthen its ties with Germany. To this end, even harsher laws were enacted against the Jews in the Occupied Zone, and hunts were organized for foreign Jews in Paris and the remainder of the zone. These Jews were sent to the detention camps established around the country. Pétain and his allies in government assumed that the Germans would be grateful for their actions against the Jews and thereby grant the French authorities greater powers over this field and others. This collaboration and the growing oppression by the Germans themselves led to a significant rise in rebel actions among groups with various political positions. Resistance movements also began to emerge among the French Jews during this period.

After some tow years of persecutions and aggressive anti-Jewish legislation, the plans to deport the Jews of France to the camps in Eastern Europe began to be put into action (plans that had been discussed following the Wannsee Conference). Government employees were introduced to do everything possible to help the Germans detain Jews, and the Germans prepared the groundwork for the deportations in the Occupied Zone. The first dispatch of Jews for extermination left in March 1942, and in June four trains departed for Auschwitz. Theodor Danker was charged with responsibility for organizing the first deportations and the first trains were filled with thousands of Jews who had been held in the camps in the Occupied Zone. Thousands of Jews immediately began to seek shelter from the Nazis and the French police, fleeing to the Free Zone or crossing the border into Switzerland.

The Winter Velodrome

On 16 July 1942, 4,500 French police officers launched a large-scale operation in Paris to arrest Jews with foreign citizenship, on the orders of the German authorities. The campaign lasted a week and ended with the detention of approximately 13,000 Jews who were held at the Winter Velodrome in conditions of extreme congestion, virtually without water, food, or sanitary facilities. The Jews were transferred from the stadium to concentration camps near Paris, and in July and August most of them were deported to Auschwitz, without their children. These actions, known as the “Vel’d’Hiv,” later became a symbol of the persecution of the Jews of France.

From the summer of 1942, the authorities began to deport Jews from the concentration camps to Auschwitz. The process began at camps in the Occupied Zone, such as Pithiviers, Beaune-la-Rolande, and of course Drancy, but later extended to camps in the Free Zone, including Gurs, Les Milles, and Rivesaltes. Campaigns and deportations were also undertaken during this period in various cities throughout France.

This period saw a change in France. For the first time, the deportations aroused substantial opposition to the Vichy regime among broad sections of the French public, since it was no longer possible to conceal the scale of the detentions and expulsions. Negative reactions began to be heard from members of the public, and many citizens reached out to provide help, whether by offering hiding places or by helping Jews to cross the border into Switzerland. Public protests against the detention and deportation operations were also made by Church institutions in France, as archbishops and priests urged the faithful to help hide Jews, and particularly children. The underground press also joined the wave of protests against the campaigns, responding on an unprecedented scale. The pressure of public opinion became an important political issue, eventually leading to a scaling back of the deportations as well as the organization of successful rescue operations. Accordingly, it can be concluded that the opposition restricted to an extent the implementation of the Final Solution in France by comparison to the original plans.

Deportation of Jews from Marseille and surrounding areas, morning of 24 January 1943

At the same time, the Vichy regime was subjected to pressure from the operate direction from the German side to meet the quotas for the deportation of French Jews. The persecution of Jews continued on the initiative of Heinz Rotke, who arrived in Paris to replace Danker as the official responsible for Jewish affairs in France. As a result of the oppression, most of the Jewish relief organizations that had hitherto acted to provide aid to Jews, both in the North and the South, went underground. Organizations such as Rue Amelot and OSE were transformed into Jewish rescue networks that worked to find hiding places for children, established children’s homes and hostels, prepared forged certificates and documents, and smuggled children across the border to Switzerland or Spain.

On 8 November 1942, the German forces took control of the South of France and the entire country became a zone of German occupation. For reasons of bureaucratic convenience, the Germans left the French civil servants in their positions in the Free Zone, under their supervision. The Vichy government continued to be active and to exercise authority throughout the country, but only on the condition that it continue to serve German interests, particularly in the military sphere. The Germans required and received extensive assistance from the regime in order to implement their plans, but during this period an increasing number of French people refused to collaborate with the hunt for Jews. Following the German occupation, the situation of Jews throughout France deteriorated rapidly and the deportations to the East now included Jews with French citizenship, usually with the assistance of the Vichy government. These Jews had generally not been included in the quota of deportees until this stage, but now the entire Jewish population of France, foreigners and citizens alike, were subject to deportation to the East. For most of the French public, the Vichy regime came to be seen as a puppet government acting under the German occupiers. At the same time, the French Resistance became a significant and broad-based movement whose members – non-Jews and Jews alike – engaged both in armed underground activities and in rescue operations.

In June 1943, Alois Brunner, an officer from Eichmann’s unit, was sent to Paris to help accelerate the deportation of the Jews from France. The SS assumed full control of Drancy, which acquired precisely the same status as any other concentration camp established b the Germans.

The liberation of Paris by the Allies, 1944

The Vichy government, which had become an arm of the German rule and implemented its orders, introduced an extensive system of anti-Jewish legislation until the end of German rule. The deportation of Jews continued until France was liberated by the Allies in August 1944.

The German goa was to annihilate the entire Jewish population of France, along with that of Europe as a whole. However, relative to other countries, the percentage of French Jews who survived was high: approximately three-fourths of the Jewish population survived, thanks mainly to the rescue operations and to the pressure of public opinion. Approximately one-fourth perished, mainly due to French collaboration with German decisions.

Based on:

*The History of the Holocaust – France*, Asher Cohen (ed.), Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, 1996 (Hebrew).

*Being a Jew in France, 1939-1945*, Renée Poznansky, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem (Hebrew).

Interview with Dora Weinberger and Shlomo Balsam, members of Alumim

“My task is to listen to their stories”

**Alumim is an Israeli association of Jewish children who were hidden in France during the Holocaust. The association was established in 1993 with the goal of preserving the memory of the Holocaust of French Jewry, and works to collect testimonies from survivors, present testimonies in schools and to IDF soldiers, and hold various ceremonies. Alumim also encourages the education system to address the history of the Jews of France during the Holocaust. This project is coordinated by Ms. Dora Weinberger. We met with Ms. Weinberger and with Mr. Shlomo Balsam, the chair of the association, in order to learn more about the important activities of this organization.**

**Could you tell us a little about yourselves?**

**Dora:** My name is Dora Weinberger, née Weissman. I was born in Germany in 1931, and after Hitler came to power in 1933 my parents moved to France. During the war we lived in France, and in 1948 I made Aliyah. After arriving in Israel I married, started a family, studied at Bar-Ilan University, and worked for almost 30 years as a French teacher and educator.

**Shlomo:** My name is Shlomo Balsam. I was born in 1948 in Paris and am a second-generation Holocaust survivor. Around 40 members of my family perished in the Holocaust. I mad Aliyah in 1968 and returned to France a few years later to serve at the Israeli embassy in Paris. I have been active in education all my life – I worked as a teacher and educator, as a coordinator of informal education, and in Israel I directed the Jewish Agency’s Hizkiyahu Institute, which trains teachers and youth leaders. Today I guide visits to Poland. For many years I served as the educational director of the FSU Desk and was responsible for education in Eastern Europe on behalf of the Jewish Agency, which was how I first came to visit Poland. Today I lead groups visiting Poland and am serving as chair of Alumim for my sixth year.

Girls at a children’s home in France

**How was the organization established and what is its objective?**

The organization was established in 1993 following a conference called The Hidden Children that focused on the issue of hidden children in all the different countries. It was decided to establish an Israeli association of children who were hidden in France. The founder of the organization, Rebbetzin Rivka Avichail, served as the first chair, and she chose the organization’s name with the help of her husband, Rabbi Eliahu Avichail. The first goal of Alumim was to create a framework to enable the members to share and document their experiences through lectures, discussion groups, speaker programs, and other activities. The main motivation was the feeling after the war that the Holocaust survivors from France were not really considered survivors. There were the heroes who fought in the ghettoes and forest, there with the survivors from the camps, the survivors from Auschwitz had numbers tattooed on them – but in the case of France there was nothing. They had “merely” been moved from place to place like parcels. In 1991, when the survivors were already adults with families, they decided to begin to talk about themselves and what happened to them during the Holocaust.

We are members of the Center Organizations of Holocaust Survivors, which serves as an umbrella body for 52 organizations representing the communities that suffered from Nazi persecution during the Second World War. We recently celebrated 20 years of activities in Alumim, and the organization is continuing to grow and expand. Every year dozens of new members join us, and we now have over 700 members and publish a newspaper with a circulation of 1,200.

Children hidden in France during the wat at a children’s home, 1943

**Is there any particular criterion for the age of the hidden children who are members of the organization?**

**Shlomo:** Definitely. According to the rule set by Alumim, a member of the organization must be someone born after 1 January 1924 and not later than 31 December 1944 – in other words, children who were aged 20 or under when the war ended. We have around 700 members who pay a membership fee of NIS 150 a month, all of them survivors who were hidden as children during the Holocaust. We also have about 30 members registered as second generation survivors. These members cannot receive financial aid, vote or be elected, but they can be chosen – as I was – to serve as chair of the organization.

**What are the organization’s main activities?**

**Shlomo:** The organization is active in various fields, one of which is organizing ceremonies and commemorations. Every year on Holocaust Day we hold a ceremony in Rogelim Forest, where a memorial has been erected to the memory of 800,000 French Jews who perished during the Holocaust. The members and their families come to the ceremony.

The memorial in Rogelim Forest

**Dora:** We try to include delegations from schools in the ceremony each year, and sometimes we also host Righteous Gentiles who hid the children. This is an important experience for the delegations, and we receive moving letters and reactions after each encounter. The children study the subject at school but encounter a completely different experience than in the textbooks. I feel the same way in my meetings with students at various schools when I tell them about my own story as a girl in France. Even children who are considered “tough cases,” and whose teachers warn me about them at the beginning of each session, listen attentively and are very moved. I think the reason for this is that this is the first time that these children have met someone in person who experienced the Holocaust – a first-person testimony rather than information in an encyclopedia or book.

As part of my work, I also initiated meetings between students and Holocaust survivors in the survivors’ homes. The students interview the survivors and then write fascinating historical projects on the basis of the testimonies. In addition to the historical information, they also include a description of the experience of meeting the survivor. I should add that the members of the organization are very willing to take part in this great project.

**Does the organization also have members who were not born in France?**

**Shlomo:** Of course. We have members who were born in North Africa or in other European countries but who experienced the Holocaust in France. The decision to include North Africa in the preparation of the historical projects created a lot of interest among the students.

**Can you tell us about the educational cooperation between Alumim and Yad Vashem?**

**Shlomo:** In 2000, when Dr. Yisrael Lichtenstein was serving as chair of the association, we began to operate the Yad Vashem Prizes project, which Dora is responsible for, as part of the research project on the Holocaust of French Jewry.

**Dora:** I was invited to France, where we established the research project to commemorate the Holocaust of the French Jews. The project is funded by the Fund for the Memory of the Holocaust in France, and has been active for 15 years in cooperation with Yad Vashem.

Yad Vashem Prizes Ceremony

**Shlomo:** In addition, as part of the project, many of the members of Alumim give testimonies in schools. These testimonies are later included in the students’ research and documentation projects. This is really a sacred task. Another activity the organization is involved in is providing medical and social assistance to members facing difficult medical or financial circumstances. We help them with dental and eye treatments and so forth. The help isn’t always financial - sometimes it is emotional, and we also provide assistance over the telephone once a week in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem.

**How do the members of the organization receive the assistance?**

**Shlomo:** The social assistance is provided in a very discrete and orderly manner, through two social workers on our behalf. This help is provided on the basis of various criteria. We have around 50 members who are receiving assistance from Amcha (the Israeli Center for Mental Health and Social Support for Holocaust Survivors and the Second Generation) – we fund their therapy.

A girl with a doll at a children’s home in France

**So around one-tenth of the association’s members seek psychological support through you?**

**Shlomo:** Absolutely, and about one-third of the members also receive social assistance. We basically cover everything that the state does not provide – both in medical terms and in terms of help coping with various bureaucratic proceedings. Another issue the association deals with, and which I have been personally involved in, is receiving compensation. In the early 2000s, France passed a law providing financial compensation to the survivors (in addition to the reparations, which require a difficult bureaucratic procedure, and where we also provide assistance). Survivors can receive compensation for expropriation or a pension as an orphan if one of their parents was deported from France and perished (whether or not they were French citizens). Helping with compensations wasn’t one of the goals of the association when it was established, but it meets a need that has emerged over the years.

**Can you briefly describe what happens at the meetings of the members of Alumim?**

**Shlomo:** The meetings and discussion groups are closed to the members only. After I was appointed chair, I asked for permission to participate in one of the sessions. I can tell you that I was absolutely amazed by the level of the discussions and the openness. For example, one member suggested that they discuss the first time they saw their parents. Two members began to talk about this and they just burst out in tears, and then they felt that it had helped them because they had felt a need to talk about it. Another time the conversation focused on fear of death during that war and during the wars in Israel (some of the hidden children fought in the War of Independence). One of the members brought his son along, an officer in the Duvdevan unit, and they tried to compare the fear then with today. It was a totally amazing experience.

**Are the encounters only for the survivors themselves, or do psychologists and other professionals sometimes join in?**

**Shlomo:** In Tel Aviv they chose to hold the meetings with a professional, the psychologist Yisrael Feldman, who is actually a victimologist. But in Jerusalem they chose to speak without a professional present.

These sessions are held about once a month.

**Dora:** I have personally met members of Alumim at the social activities in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv who have really become part of my family.

Children at one of UGIF’s children’s homes

**In light of your extensive work in the association and your own life experiences, Dora, could you try to explain the impact that living as a hidden child has on someone?**

**Dora:** When Rebbetzin Rivka Avichail, who was a French teacher, began to look for hidden children in order to establish the organization, we didn’t even understand what a hidden child was, even though we were all hidden children ourselves. Over the years we just hadn’t talked about this subject, because by comparison to the horrors experienced by the Jews in Eastern Europe, we felt that we didn’t have anything to “offer” in terms of our story. We couldn’t talk about our parents’ experiences in the Holocaust, and actually most of us were happy during the Holocaust. I think that the sentence that sums us up best is “they played during the day and cried during the night.” Thanks to Rivka we established a small group of members and went from one person to the next, trying to document their experiences. I was responsible for getting them to open up to me.

**How did you document the stories?**

**Dora:** I made recordings with a tape recorded and then later I sat down and typed it up. The outcomes were sent to the Fondation de la Shoah Mémoire in Paris and to Yad Vashem. It wasn’t easy to get the survivors to talk. At first they only gave me technical information – “we were hidden in such-and-such a place,” and they insisted that apart from that “nothing happened.” They didn’t understand the damage they had suffered due to being hidden – damage that remained for many years to come. Today things are different – people telephone me of their own accord through our hotline. My task is to listen to their stories, and in order to do that I need a lot of mental strength. Of course I also have my own personal story that I take with me.

Their amazing stories make think about how, as children in hiding, we managed to maintain our sanity, more or less. For example, I think about Moshe Roth’s book (Rooster Boy). He was hidden on a farm and had no-on to talk to. His best friend was a rooster who he played and talked with.

**Shlomo:** There’s also Miriam Tropper from Sde Eliahu, who was hidden together with her sister for a year under a pigsty. They would only come out at night to breathe fresh air.

**Dora:** It’s important to understand that taking care of a little four-year-old girl, when you yourself are only 10, as I was with my sister, is also considered being alone.

This area formed the basis for another activity of the organization, which is to provide information for people who were hidden during the Holocaust in France. People who don’t have information turn to us and ask for help. For example, one survivor told me that when she was two, she was thrown out of a train heading for Auschwitz. Before she was thrown out, they put a note with her first name and family name, but without her parents’ name. A farmer picked her up and saved her life, and at the end of the war he handed her over to the Jewish orphanages in France. I spent a month researching this case, with the help of the historian Serge Klarsfeld, who in 1990 opened up the records of the French and discovered some important details about her. At the end of the process I was able to give her three important details: her real date of birth, who her parent were, and a third detail that was particularly painful: that she wasn’t alone on the train. She had two brothers who died along with her parents.

**Shlomo:** That same woman was in an orphanage after the war. Since no-one came to ask for her, she was placed in a Youth Aliyah group and came to Israel at the age of five or six. On the kibbutz she was given a Hebrew first name, and this is the identity she’s known all her life. When she asked me the question, I asked her – why now, when she was nearly 80, was she suddenly taking an interest in her identity? Her answer was that her grandson was doing a project on his family roots and she didn’t know how to help him. So in this way, through the second and third generations, the survivors are starting to find out details about themselves.

Carers with a baby in a children’s home in France

I myself only began to get involved in the subject of the Holocaust when I was nearly 50, and that’s when I investigated my own roots properly. Now is really the last minute for the Holocaust survivors to document and explore their histories, with the help of sources and the many studies that have already been undertaken. In the members’ discussion groups they also find out new things all the time.

**Is the organization also involved in the subject of the Righteous Gentiles in France?**

**Shlomo:** Absolutely. Alumim has done a lot over the years to recognize the rescuers who hid our members as Righteous Gentiles. Every year on Holocaust Day a delegation of the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the Righteous Gentiles come to Israel as the guests of the France-Israel Friendship Association and meet with survivors and their families. This is part of an initiative by Sarah, a Jewish woman from France, together with Berta, a member of Alumim.

**What do you think was special about the fate of the children hidden in France?**

**Dora:** The Holocaust is France was different than the Holocaust in Eastern Europe, and this is something I’ve seen over my ten years working in the Righteous Gentile Committee. Firstly, there were no ghettoes in France. Secondly, in France they took the men first, while the women and children were left on their own. Sometimes the women left the cities and went to seek shelter in the villagers. Thirdly, rescue networks were established, such as the Jewish organization Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants (OSE), which took children out of the detention camps such as Pithiviers and Beaune-la-Rolande and concealed them in various hiding places and refuges – farmhouses, monasteries, and other institutions.

One of the children’s homes in France

**Shlomo:** Right. In the East, where the Jews underwent terrible atrocities, some children were also saved, but in France the rescue operation had a unique character. A total of 10,000 children were hidden and rescued in France by Jewish underground organizations, by smuggling them to Switzerland (Andrea Salomon was particularly active in this case) or Spain, or by finding them various hiding places. And 50,000 children were hidden by local residents. A total of 11,400 Jewish children perished in France, so relative to the population this was a minority (there were 300,000 Jews in France, including around 70,000 children). This is a unique phenomenon!

**Can you tell us about your website?**

**Dora:** We have a website in Hebrew and French that attracts quite a lot of visitors. I started to establish it, and now it includes a lot of material. Unfortunately we don’t have enough people who are willing to work on a voluntary basis. When we get money to employ someone, we find it hard to find someone who knows Hebrew and French and is an expert on the subject.

**Shlomo:** Of course we also have our journal in Hebrew and French, which is funded by the membership fees. The editor is the journalist Michael Blum, who isn’t a member of the organization, but his family is. The journal is arranged thematically and is mainly used to provide additional study materials for schools. The goal is to upload this material to the website, too.

**Dora:** Our spokesperson, Rivka Avichail, initiated the founding of the journal. The first issues were limited in scope and appeared in French, because our Hebrew wasn’t good enough. At present, because of our financial situation, the journal is only issued three times a year. Over recent years the members have been strict about writing for the journal in Hebrew without any linguistic editing, even though some of them still don’t have particularly good Hebrew. The journal today includes a large quantity of didactic and pedagogic material, and the fact that it’s written in Hebrew makes it accessible to school students who receive it from us. The students can use the journals to help them write their project.

**In conclusion, do you think that the association has a vision for its future, particularly given the members’ age?**

**Shlomo:** It’s true that most of the activities in the organization are undertaken by the first generation, with a few people from the second generation, like myself. I’m not sure right now whether they will continue with it. For example, the underground organization that was closed was reopened by the second generation, but it only lasted for a year. The number of bodies in the Center of Organizations is falling as the years pass. On the other hand, some organizations are not declining, such as the Organization of Israelis of Central European Origin. It’s true that not many people from the second generation come to Alumim’s activities, with the exception of the ceremony in Rogalit, but we are constantly trying to involve them. So far it hasn’t worked too well, but we keep on hoping.

Interview with Holocaust survivor Dora Weinberger

“I told them what I’d been through […] The children couldn’t believe what I was telling them.”

**Dora Weinberg (née Weissman) was born in German in 1931 to an Orthodox family. After Hitler came to power in Germany, her family moved to Metz in France. In 1939, when the area was annexed to Germany, Dora’s family and other refugees were relocated in Angoulême in western France. After France was occupied by the Germans in June 1940 and the authorities began to detain Jewish men, the family fled to the Free Zone, where they lived as refugees until the zone was occupied by the Germans. At the beginning of 1943, as the situation for the Jews worsened and fear of detention grew, Dora and her sister were transferred to hiding places by representatives of the organization OSE. Later the girls were reunited with their parents. In 1948, Dora made Aliyah with her mother and sister. She married Moshe Weinberger and they had two children. For many years Dora worked as a teacher. She now works in Alumim, and coordinates educational projects at Yad Vashem to commemorate the Holocaust in France. She is a member of the committee responsible for granting recognition to Righteous Gentiles. We met with Dora to hear about her experiences during this period.**

**Could you tell us about your family?**

My father, Israel Weissman, was born in Poland to a religious family in the city of Stary. He moved to Germany in 1920 for financial reasons. At first he stayed in touch with his family back in Poland, but the connection was broken after 1939. My mother was born in 1907 in Cologne, Germany, to an ultra-Orthodox family. My parents married in 1930 and moved from Cologne to Gelsenkirschen, where I was born in 1931.

The Weissman family in 1939 in Metz, France

**How did Hitler’s rise to power in 1933 affect you all?**

When my father felt that the situation for the Jews in Germany was becoming hard, he decided that we should emigrate to France, after his brother, who was already living there, told him that things were better there for the Jews. At first we lived in Paris for a few months, and then we moved to the city of Metz in the Alsace-Lorraine region. There was a large community of French Jews in the city known as the “Yekkes” who had been there for many generations, as well as Ostjuden – Jews who had immigrated from Eastern Europe. They worked in commerce and craft shops and were very poor. There was no contact between the two groups.

My father worked together with his brother David in a factory making sacks, and my mother managed the home in a very strict and organized way. We maintained a bourgeois and traditional lifestyle. Our financial situation was good and we didn’t experience any anti-Semitism. In 1934 my brother Daniel was born, but very sadly he died a few months later, and in 1935 my sister Hilde was born. Over time my parents began to learn French, although we spoke German at home. I went to a non-Jewish girls’ school and to the Jewish Scouts and I felt like any other French girl. My mother stayed in touch with her parents in Germany until 1938 and even went back to visit her parents in Cologne in that year. But then they lost contact. I can remember them all – my mother’s parents and sisters. Most of them perished.

**What happened in 1938?**

In that year they evacuated all the Jews from Alsace-Lorraine. So we all became refugees and had to move to western France – several hundred families. We moved to a city called Angoulême. At first it was very hard, even though we received financial assistance from the municipality as refugees, because the evacuation was an official process. After quite a long time my father found work as a merchant in the markets. My mother stayed at home and I went to a girls’ school. There, too, we had nice home, thanks to my mother, who managed to make the miserable apartment look more esthetic.

The occupation of France, May 1940

**What changed after France was occupied by the Germans in 1940?**

We Jews who were left in the Occupied Zone faced a very difficult situation, including the anti-Jewish orders issued by the Germans. At first a curfew was imposed, and Jews were forbidden to leave home after six o’clock in the evening. Jews were also dismissed from their jobs. In July 1942, all the Jews above the age of six were obliged to wear yellow stars – something that was very hard for me as a 10-year-old. My parents had to register with the municipality and the police, because we weren’t considered French and we didn’t have citizenship. This was part of the order requiring all Jews to have word “juif” (“Jew”) stamped in their identity cards. I spoke at the police station, because my father’s French wasn’t very good. We received the yellow star at the municipality in return for clothes vouchers. Each of us was given two stars in return for three vouchers each – something that means that we couldn’t buy clothes or shoes for several months.

**Who did you react to the order to wear the yellow star?**

On the first day when I wore the yellow star to school, I saw that some girls were hiding their stars with their books or bag. I was never ashamed and I never hid it. Maybe I was naïve and unaware of how serious the situation was. The same day the teacher moved the girls with the yellow star to the end of the class and ignored us. This really annoyed me, but I managed to concentrate on my studies, and particularly on the exam for moving on to senior-high school. Three weeks later, at the end of June, they began to expel all the Jewish children from school, but I was lucky. The teacher told my parents that I was allowed to take the exam because of my achievements at school. School continued until nearly the end of July, but they told us at the beginning of the month that we couldn’t go to school anymore.

A Jewish family wearing the yellow star, France

**What other rules were imposed on you and on the other Jews in France?**

One order prohibited Jews to enter public places – swimming pools, parks, cinemas, or libraries. That damaged our way of life. Until then my mother used to take me and my sister on Thursdays to the public baths in preparation for Shabbat. I couldn’t continue to borrow books from the library as I had done before. The librarian, with whom I had been friendly, made this clear to me one day when I went to the library with the yellow star to borrow some books. “Give me the books and get out of here. You can’t come back.” I asked her why and she said, “You have a yellow star.” I sat on the steps and started to cry.

A few days later I was also sent out of a stationery store when I wanted to buy a youth newspaper. I tried to mediate between the French-speaking salesman and a German officer who wanted to buy a pen, since I knew both languages. The shopkeeper tried to send me out of the store. The officer said, “Thank you, my girl. Today is a very hard day for you. Run home.” And on the way home I saw French soldiers shoving Jews into trucks by force, while German soldiers stood by watching. A French boy who lived near my home, and who I’d never spoken to before, told me, “Are you crazy walking around the streets today? Don’t you have anything to do? They’re killing all the dirty Jews. Go home.” When I got home I saw that my father was nervous and agitated and my mother was crying, saying “the girl” over and over. My father explained that this was a very big “Aktion” (over 200 Jewish men were taken) and that we had to run away. I didn’t know exactly how, but someone had warned him that he was on the list of detainees who were supposed to be taken the next day. While I had been wandering the streets all day, he had handed my sister over to a young woman from the OSE organization, which hid and saved children in France during the Holocaust. This woman pretended to be a married woman with two children who lived in the Free Zone, and with the help of a fake transit certificate she came to see her “parents” in the Occupied Zone. In this way she took children regularly from the Occupied Zone and hid them in the Free Zone.

Children at an OSE children’s home after the war

**Did you understand what was happening to the Jews?**

In the community people realized that for the moment they were only taking the Jewish men, and that there were concentration camps for Jews. But they didn’t know about the extermination camps. As a little girl, all I heard were strange words like “detention” and “list,” and I didn’t know what they meant. The move to the Free Zone required my parents to send my little sister first. We thought that moving to the Free Zone would save us, although there were quite a lot of camps there, too.

We left the apartment in the middle of the night. My mother dressed me in layers of clothes although it was summer, because we couldn’t take anything with us. We arrived at the railroad station in Angoulême in the middle of the night. Along the way my father tore off our yellow stars and threw them away. We got on a train heading for the Free Zone and we sat in the water container with two other Jews we knew. The water came up to our waists and it was cold, but as the train traveled the water got hotter (because like all the trains at that time it worked on coal). When the train stopped at a station my mother put her handover my mouth. We could hear the Germans shouting and dogs barking. It emerged that the Germans, together with French police, were taking Jews off the train who had been trying to cross the dividing line with forged documents, or without any documents but without their yellow stars. Then I needed to urinate, and because there were other people there I was embarrassed and I started to cry. My mother told me to do it, and we went on the journey in polluted water for almost 24 hours. I can still feel and smell the water to this day. Eventually we arrived in Limoges, which was on the other side of the line in the Free Zone. The engine was detached from the wagons and brought into a railroad hanger, and we waited there until nighttime to avoid inspections by the Germans or the French. In the morning my father began to search for my sister and eventually found her with help from OSE. We stayed with relatives in the city for a few days, until my father decided that it was too complicated to live somewhere without documents or ration cards and with little money. So we traveled to my uncle, who lived in a small town south of Limoges called Lectoure, where there were already some refugees from Alsace-Lorraine.

**How did you live in Lectoure?**

The town welcomed us very nicely. Like the other refugees, we were given a home. But it was in a very poor condition – an abandoned building without running water, electricity, or a toilet. But this home saved our lives. It had an attic where my father arranged a hiding space, and we began new life. My parents didn’t go to work, but I started school in October, and I think my sister went to kindergarten. A cousin of ours who had fled from Antwerp also lived with us. Her children had been hidden in a children’s home.

Because of the First World War, the inhabitants of this region hated the Germans, and this affected me, because my name – Dora Weissman – sounds German. On one of my first days at school, some boys even attacked me in recess and started to beat me severely. They called me a “damn German” and I replied that I wasn’t German. “We escaped from the Germans in Angoulême just a few weeks ago – I’m Jewish.” “Jewish?” they retorted, and beat me even harder, calling me a “dirty Jew” and claiming that I had killed the baby Jesus. I went home disheveled, my skirt torn and my notebooks dirty. My mother didn’t want me to go to school anymore, but my father told me to go and promised it would pass. Eventually they moved me to another class, and the teacher told me, “Your name is Denise” – without a surname, because he couldn’t give me a false identity card. And that’s how it went. I kept on going to school and I was a good student.

An attic used as a hiding place during the war

**How did life change after the Germans occupied the Free Zone in November 1942?**

There weren’t any Germans in the town, although the whole area was occupied. At the beginning of 1943 two French gendarmes knocked loudly on the door. While they were waiting, my father went and hid in the attic. My mother opened the door but she was so scared that she couldn’t understand what they were saying. I went up to them and asked them what was happening. The policeman asked whether my father was at home. I replied that he wasn’t, because he worked for a farmer and he often didn’t come home. The first policeman told the second one that my father was a Jew and he probably didn’t come home because he was drunk and lying by the roadside. The policemen explained that my father was on a list and they had to arrest him. If he came home he should prepare a small suitcase because they would be coming the next day. These gendarmes actually saved my father’s life by warning us that he was on the list, and they did this deliberately. After all, if they’d come inside and searched, they would have found him. That same night they arrested 22 men aged 20 to over 40.

The next day some boy came to see us and told us that the priest wanted to see my father and hide him. He told me that my father should come at night, and he did so. My father was hidden in the belfry of the church by the priest for a week, together with two other Jews. The priest was a member of the underground and he knew that Jews who were detained were being sent to Drancy and then to the East. I took food to my father at night because he refused to eat the non-kosher food made by the priest’s housekeeper. A few days later he asked me to bring his tallit instead of food. As a child I couldn’t understand why my father, as a persecuted Jew, was asking for his tallit rather than food. By running these errands I was endangering myself, my father, and even the priest who was hiding him.

**What happened next?**

There were some very big “Aktions” at the time. Women and children were also being arrested, so we had to separate from my mother. It was very hard to leave her. She told me: “Remember one thing: Weissman Palestine.” She was referring to my father’s elder brother, who had managed to reach the Land of Israel.

The rescue networks – Jewish and non-Jewish – took the children from their homes and hid them in various institutions. My sister and I were taken to Toulouse and hidden with a very cruel non-Jewish woman. She shut us up in a small room, left us with a bottle of water and a piece of stale bread, and left the home for several days. I found a small tin on a dresser in the kitchen with cookies in. Every day I took two or three cookies and hid them in my underwear. When the child began to cry that she was hungry, I would take out one cookie at a time. But when the woman realized what I was doing (the French people themselves didn’t have much food), she threw them away one morning.

I found myself in a large and unfamiliar city without clothes, money, or documents, in the cold month of February. I met two young men and asked them where there was a church, because I knew that priests were saving Jews. One of them replied in Yiddish that I needed a synagogue. They took me to a little office of OSE, asked me lots of questions, and told me that I couldn’t go back to my mother. They sent me to a children’s home run by a nun in the south of France, close to the border with Spain. The nun knew that we were Jews and insister that we must behave just like Christian French children.

**What was life like for you in the children’s home at the monastery?**

We arrived in a residential school where we spent several months with lots of orphans – the children of fallen or captured soldiers. We were bruised and dirty, because we hadn’t bathed during our 10 days in Toulouse. I had lice so the nurse shaved my head and gave me a rag soaked in petroleum to put on. I had beautiful long hair, but not as nice as my little sister. The nurse told me that she would decide in the morning whether to shave my sister’s head, too, because she didn’t have as many lice. I spent the whole night in the bathroom cleaning my sister’s head, and so her hair was saved. I cried when they shaved my head, but a girl called Malvine comforted me and told me that it would grow back in time. She was a few years older than me, and she guided me in how to manage there and how to comfort my sister when she cried.

We had to go to church on Sunday, pray, and even bow down. My sister refused to do this, and I slapped her once because of this. I told her that no-one must see that we were different, because it would endanger us. There were other Jews there, too, but I didn’t know this at the time because they kept quiet.

**When did you meet your parents?**

My mother found us. She searched the lists and took us out of the children’s home. We moved with our parents and a large group of Jews to Nice, which was under Italian rule. Then we moved on to the Alps and eventually to Switzerland. We entered Switzerland on a cold, snowy night in September 1943, with forged documents, because the Swiss were guarding the borders to prevent Jews entering. I caught pneumonia and sinusitis because of the journey.

We didn’t feel free in Switzerland. My parents and my little sister were taken to a town called Morgins. My parents were held in a work camp under Swiss control, and the director of the camp, who knew about Drancy, often threatened to send the Jews back to France. My sister stayed in a children’s home inside the camp, while I was sent to a religious school run by Dr. Simon in Bex-les-Bains. Before the war the school had served girls from wealthy families from across Europe. There, too, they threatened that if we didn’t work we would be sent back to France. I didn’t see my parents for three years. Because of the feeling of abandonment for so many years, some children simply hated their parents. They couldn’t understand that it was done for their own good.

Dora Weissman, age 17

**What did you do when the war ended?**

For me the return to normal life was very hard. I’d been without my parents for years and I didn’t know what family life meant. After lots of bureaucracy we went back to Metz in 1946, but we didn’t find anything there. We rented a miserable apartment, my father began to sell things in the markets, and I went back to school with the help of private lessons, because I hadn’t studied for years. A year later my father died. It was very hard. My mother was left alone with two girls in a dismal apartment, without money or work. Her father and sister had made Aliyah from Germany and were living in Bnei Brak, so she decided that we should also move to Israel. We spent a few months in Marseille in a transit camp called Grand Arenas that was run by the Palmach. I was very impressed by the young men from the Palmach.

**Can you describe the difficulties of adapting to life in Israel?**

I was miserable. Yet again I was taken out of school, which was the only thing that mattered to me. My father had died and I was taken away from French culture, which I was very devoted to. We arrived in Bnei Brak and I didn’t know the language. I couldn’t read the signs and I didn’t understand what people said to me. I could pray, but the everyday language was something completely different, and there weren’t Ulpanim yet. I only overcome the problems and got used to the atmosphere in Israel thanks to my husband Moshe (a cousin on my mother’s side), who I married in 1949, and thanks to my children. I went to study French at Bar-Ilan and I worked as a school educator for many years, firstly at Blich in Ramat Gan and later in Kfar Sava.

We’ve been married for 65 years and we have a wonderful family. My two children are Yehudit, who was born in 1951 and is now has three grandchildren, and Danny, who was born in 1956 and has two granddaughters.

Dora Weinberger - five generations

**When did you begin to talk about your experiences during the Holocaust?**

I didn’t speak about my experiences during the Holocaust for many years. I didn’t say anything. In fact, as a teacher, I asked for special permission not to come to the Holocaust Day ceremonies for many years. Then one year I told my students what I had been through. I was a class educator for a 10th grade class then, and my students had been asked to prepare the Holocaust Day ceremony. The idea was to talk about the Warsaw Ghetto, but I suggested that I tell them about what happened in France. I told them, “You know that I was younger than you are, and I walked around with a yellow star on. There was terrible suffering.” There was absolute silence in the class. The children couldn’t believe what I was telling them, even though I’d been teaching them since eighth grade. They really hadn’t known what happened in France. One boy even asked me whether there had been a Holocaust in France.

After this experience I began to take an interest in the subject, researching and studying. After I retired from teaching I worked as an inspector for several years. Then they established Alumim, where I’ve been working for 20 years now.

**Can you tell us about your work at Alumim?**

Alumim is an Israeli association of children who were hidden in France during the Holocaust. At first the organization concentrated on documenting the history of the Holocaust survivors. Five years ago, in cooperation with France, we launched an educational project to research the history of the Holocaust in France. Because of my background in education, I led the project together with the School of Holocaust Studies at Yad Vashem. This is an important project, because for many years many survivors from Western Europe felt that they hadn’t been through the “real Holocaust” like those from the East. I am also a member of the committee at Yad Vashem that recognizes Righteous Gentiles, and I’m responsible for the French Righteous Gentiles.

“Au revoir les enfants” – director: Louis Malle

**Au revoir les enfants**

**Director: Louis Malle**

**France, 1987 / French (Hebrew trans.) / 85 minutes (color)**

The film we will discuss in this issue had its beginnings in France, when director Louis Malle was a young student at the Petit Collège des Carme, a Christian school in Avon (Seine-et-Marne). The principal of the school, Lucien Bunel, better known as “Father Jacques,” decided to accept persecuted Jewish students at the school. Father Jacques accepted three Jewish students: Jacques Halpern, Maurice Schlosser, and Hans Helmut Michel. The three boys lived and studied at the school under false identity and names given to them by Bunel. Bunel also employed Lucien Weil, a teacher of natural sciences who had been dismissed from his previous job following the Vichy regime’s restrictions on the employment of Jews. On 15 January 1944, after informers provided precise information about the Jewish students, Gestapo police arrived at the school gates and arrested the three Jewish students and Father Jacques; Lucien Weil and his family were arrested later the same day. The three Jewish students, Weil, and his family were sent to Auschwitz, where they perished. The school was closed on the orders of the Germans, and Father Jacques was deported to Mauthausen. He managed to survive until the liberation but, exhausted by the inhuman conditions of his imprisonment, he succumbed several days later. His body was returned to France and buried in the cemetery of Avon.

Since Bunel’s Jewish protégés perished, the testimony about Father Jacques’ attempt to save them was given by Hans Helmut’s sister. She added that during the school vacations he arranged a meeting between her and her brother. She expressed her gratitude to Father Jacques and explained that she did not how and when she could pay the school tuition. Father Jacques replied that he expected nothing in return; on the contrary, he would be pleased to see her brother continue his studies, and since the boy had no parents, Bunel would gladly take their place. On January 17, 1985, Yad Vashem recognized Lucien Bunel, also known as Father Jacques, as a Righteous Among the Nations.[[37]](#footnote-37)

Louis Malle, who was a student at the school himself and witnessed the rescue story, wrote and directed the film *Au revoir les enfants* in 1987. The film was extremely successful and won important cinema prizes. The scenario of the film was published in book form in the same year. The plot of the film is based on authentic events from Louis Malle’s youth.

A new student arrives in the class of the film’s hero Julien Quentin, a character who is possible based on Malle himself. The new student, Jean Bonnet, turns out to be particularly gifted in mathematics, writing, and piano studies. Quentin had until then considered himself the most outstanding of his peers and became jealous. The two boys are mutually suspicious and occasionally hostile. However, the intimate family atmosphere at the school eventually turns the relationship between the two boys into a deep friendship.

Quentin is curious about the new student, who unlike his peers does not attend prayers or eat the pork served at lunch. This leads him to discover Jean’s secret. However, thanks to the friendship between the two, Quentin remains loyal to his friend and does not reveal the fact that he is Jewish. Quentin’s concern for Bonnet’s wellbeing ostensibly leads him to be seized by the Gestapo, although in reality the reason was clearly the precise information provided about the Jewish students attending the school.

*Au revoir les enfants* is a fascinating catalog featuring characters who shared similar experiences yet made totally different choices. The film depicts the “free” France of the Vichy regime under Marshal Pétain, depicting the different sections of French society and their responses to the collaboration and to the German presence in France. The students’ political discussions, which also reflect their parents’ positions, cast light on the attitude to the regime that collaborated with the Nazis – an attitude that ranged from support through suspicion to hatred and opposition to Nazism and to collaboration.

It is interesting to examining and contrast two characters – the rescuer Father Jacques and Joseph, who eventually becomes a collaborator at the end of the film.

Father Jacques agrees to take in Jewish students at the school, perhaps for religious Christian motives of mercy and compassion for the persecuted. It is important to recognize that the effort to keep the identity of Bonnet and the other Jewish students a secret demanded that several members of the teaching staff share the secret. They also took the risk that the rescue attempt would be discovered and they would be punished by the Germans. Many of the parents regarded Father Jacques’ holiday sermon to the children and parents as excessively hostile and critical. The speech struck at the soft underbelly of French bourgeois society, which Jacques believed accepted reality and abandoned the believers’ fundamental beliefs:

*“My children, we are living in an age of rife and hatred, The lie is full of strength. Christians are killing each other, and those who are supposed to guide our way are betraying us. More than ever, we must beware of selfishness and apathy.*

*You all come from wealthy families, in some cases very wealthy. Since you have been given a lot, you will also be asked to give a lot […] Material wealth corrupts the souls and dries up the hearts. It makes people scornful, lacking in a sense of justice and merciless in their selfishness. I well understand the rage of those who have nothing while the rich arrogantly stuff themselves. […] Let us pray for all those in suffering, those who are hungry, those who are persecuted. Let us pray for the victims and also for the hangmen*.[[38]](#footnote-38)

The intermediate generation between the priests and the young students is represented by Joseph, the young lad who works in the kitchen at the school. The seventeen-year-old boy comes from the margins of society and is afflicted by a slight disability. He is unlikely to be drafted and he does not appear to have completed school. Joseph is ostracized and mocked by most of the students. He deals with some of them on the local black market, selling the food items their parents send to them in return for stamps. Joseph’s nascent anti-Semitism is hinted at in an early scene during a commercial negotiation with Julien. When Julien proves to be a tough bargainer, Joseph hisses: “You’re a real Jew.”[[39]](#footnote-39)

After the illegal trading is exposed, Joseph and the students involved are summoned to Father Jacques’ room. The priest always encourages the students to share the parcels they receive from their parents with their friends who do not receive them (including the Jewish students, whose parents have already been detained, imprisoned, and deported from France). He chastises them:

*“For me, the true meaning of education is to use the freedom of choice you enjoy properly. And here is the outcome! You disgust me. There is nothing I find more repellent than the black market. Money, always money.”[[40]](#footnote-40)*

Father Jacques cancels the students’ Easter vacation and dismisses Joseph. Malle hints that the priest regrets dismissing Joseph as he continues to look at him. His action turns out to have tragic consequences for the priest and his students. Joseph becomes a collaborator and provides the Gestapo with information about the rescue attempt. When the Gestapo raid the school, Jean Bonnet (Kippelstein), Dupre, Negus, and Father Jacques are arrested. The helpless Father Jacques turns to his students: “Au revoir les enfants.”

In his autobiography Where Memory Leads,[[41]](#footnote-41) the historian and Holocaust researcher Shaul Friedlander describes his childhood in France during the Second World War. Friedlander’s family, who originally came from Czechoslovakia, migrated to France not long before it was also occupied by the Nazis. In an attempt to save the child, his parents decided to send him to a Christian residential school in the Vichy zone run by priests. The young boy was baptized and renamed Paul-Henri Marie Ferland. Friedlander was required to learn the Christian prayers quickly and become familiar with the Christian way of life in order to blend into his surroundings without arousing the suspicion of the other students or staff who were not party to the secret. The inherent duality of a false identity and the need to maneuver between different identities, or to erase any memory of the old “I,” is the foundation for the distress and tragedy experienced by those who were hidden or who lived under an assumed identity. Friedlander’s longing and concern for his parents during this period may help us understand what the character of Jean Bonnet and many other children hidden under false identity experienced. Friedlander described the process he was forced to undergo:

*“The conversion of an adult may be a merely formal matter, and such cases were numerous during the war, or it may be the outcome of a spiritual development leading to a freely-made decision; nothing disappears, but everything changes shape: In this case, the new identity changes the previous existence, which is retrospectively regarded as a maturation or preparation. The denial of the past that was imposed on me was not merely formal – after all, my father had agreed not only to my conversion, but also to ensure that I would receive a Catholic education if life returned to its normal track. And it goes without saying that it was also not the outcome of a spiritual development. The first ten years of my life, my childhood memories, had to vanish, since there can be no synthesis between what I was and what I had to be from this point forth.”[[42]](#footnote-42)*

*“In my own way, I totally denied my past: Although I was aware of my origins, I felt comfortable among those who felt nothing but scorn for the Jews, and I casually enflamed this scorn. I had the feeling – undefined yet clear – that I had moved over to the firm and invincible majority, and that I no longer belonged to the camp of the persecuted, but – at least potentially – to the camp of the persecutors. […] Paul Friedlander had vanished –Paul-Henri Ferland was another person.”[[43]](#footnote-43)*

Friedlander’s parents attempted to escape to Switzerland but were caught and deported to Auschwitz. After the war, as an orphan, he planned to continue with his church education. One of the priests who had been involved in educating him and who had a close relationship with him called him in for a conversation, reminding him of his Jewish past and of the fate of his perished parents. It is important to note that not all the clerics who helped to conceal Jewish children acted in this manner: some of them preferred that the children remain Christians rather than return them to Judaism.

*“For the first time I felt myself to be Jewish – this time not against my will or in secret, but through an impulse or full identification. Although I knew nothing about Judaism and I was still Catholic, something had changed, a connection had been recreated, an identity had emerged and risen – certainly confused, perhaps contradictory, but from here on connected to a central axis that could not be doubted: In some way or another, I am a Jew, whatever the meaning of this concept may be in my mind’s eye.*

*The priest’s attitude in itself influenced me profoundly: The excitement and respect as he spoke to me of the fate of the Jews certainly constituted an enormous encouragement. He did not push me to choose one way or the other – and he might perhaps have preferred me to remain a Catholic – but his sense of justice (or perhaps it was a profound fellowship) restored my right to judge for myself, by helping me to renew my connection with my past.”*

The synthesis between *Au revoir les enfants* and the memoirs of Shaul Friedlander may cast light on the end of the film (when the children are handed over) and on the events that might have transpired had Father Jacques’ protégés survived. The two stories offer a potential foundation for an educational discussion of the issues they raise, including premature maturation, the relations between Jews and French people under Nazi occupation, local anti-Semitism, life with a double identity during the Holocaust, collaboration with the Nazis, and, of course, the rescue stories. We began our review with the true story of Lucien Bunel (Father Jacques) in order to anchor the film in the historical context in which it was made. However, another possible message is that an attempted rescue should not be evaluated according to its outcome but according to its intention. In other words, although it does not end with the survival of the persecuted, it still constitutes a human gesture of mercy, and sometimes even a personal and tragic act of sacrifice on the rescuer’s part.

**Focus of Discussion**

• What is Quentin’s initial attitude toward Bonnet? How does this attitude change over time?

• How does Quentin react when he discovers that his classmate is a Jew? Could we say that he has anti-Jewish prejudices?

• Bonnet says that he is afraid all the time. What difficulties did he face during his studies in a Christian school (discuss different aspects of his Jewish background, the uncertainty about his parents, and existential anxiety)?

• How would you describe the character of Father Jacques? Discuss different scenes (Quentin’s confession, the priest’s sermon in church, his capture by the Germans).

• Regarding the scene in which Quentin’s family sit in the restaurant with Bonnet, describe the different reactions when the militia men come in an “expose” the Jew.

• How would you describe Joseph’s character? Why do you think he collaborates with the Germans at the end of the film?

• Try to compare the characters of Father Jacques and Joseph. Discuss each one’s motives and behavior.

1. Asher Cohen, *The History of the Holocaust – France*, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem 5756, pp. 410-411 (Hebrew). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In the South – the United Resistance Movements (March 1943) and in the North – the National Committee of the Resistance (May 1943). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.yadvashem.org/he/articles/general/underground2.html#footnote3_rklkja9> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Cohen, pp. 394-396. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://www.yadvashem.org/he/articles/general/underground2.html#footnote5_f0xoz95> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Cohen, pp. 394-401. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Cohen, p. 400. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Cohen, p. 348. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Main-d’œuvre immigrée – FTP-MOI. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Cohen, pp. 454-458. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Armée Juive. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Cohen, pp. 404-405. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Cohen, p. 405. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Organization Juive de Combat – OJC. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Cohen, pp. 492-497. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Source for the log: Archives du Centre de Documentation Juive Contemporaine (CDJC), in Cohen, p. 494. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Francs-tireurs partisans – FTP. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Cohen, pp. 406-409; Renée Poznansky, *Being a Jew in France 1939-1945* (translated to Hebrew by Ada Paldor), Yad Vashem, 5760, pp. 444-451; *Notre Parole*, 8 March 1943. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Cohen, p. 409. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Comité Général de Défense – CGD. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Cohen, pp. 410-480; Poznansky, pp. 444-559. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Cohen, p. 410-480. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Networks of activists from the youth movements and various other organizations who engaged in illegal activities to save Jews, such as Circuit Garel, the network of Moussa Abadi, and the Service André. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Cohen, pp. 401-464; Poznansky, pp. 507-522. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Le Chambon sur Lignon. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Saint Germain de Calberte. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Fay sur Lignon. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Cohen, pp. 414-454; Poznansky, pp. 522-533. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Cohen, pp. 401-464. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Cohen, pp. 437-474; Poznansky, pp. 493-503. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Cohen, pp. 492-497. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Union des Juifs pour la Résistance et l’Entraide – UJRE. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Conseil Représentatif des Institutions Juives de France – CRIF. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Poznansky, pp. 575-576. See also: Renée Poznansky, “The Zionist Youth Movements in France and Unity in the Jewish World 1940-1944” (translated to Hebrew by Ada Paldor), in: *The Holocaust – History and Memory*, Festschrift for Israel Gutman, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, 2002, pp. 46-57 (Hebrew). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. *CJDC*, XXII-12; AN, AJ 38, 1097, in: Poznansky, p. 576. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Lucien Lazare (ed.), *Encyclopedia of the Righteous Among the Nations – France*, Yad Vashem, 2003, pp. 116-117 (series editor: Israel Gutman). [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Louis Malle, *Au revoir les enfants*, Sifriya La’am, 1988, p. 79 [the Hebrew transcript of the film]. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Malle, ibid., p. 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Malle, ibid., pp. 97-98. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Shaul Friedlander, *Where Memory Leads*, Adam, 1980 (Hebrew). [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Friedlander, ibid., p. 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Friedlander, ibid., pp. 115-116. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)