Remembering the Good: Social Memory and the Resistance to Violence in the Plateau Vivarais-Lignon

Dr. Margaret Paxson, Anthropologist and Research Fellow at Georgetown University, has conducted research in the Russian city of Solovyovo, the North Caucasus, and in rural France, which has led to findings on the development and maintenance of social memory. In her November 8 presentation for the European Union Center Lecture Series, which REEEC co-sponsored, Dr. Paxson drew our attention to the small, rural town of Le Chambon sur Lignon, France, which has an extraordinary legacy.

Le Chambon sur Lignon is located on a plateau in south-central France, but neither the geographic disposition, religion, or nationality can fully explain the events that transpire there. During World War II, this rural Protestant town orchestrated, what Dr. Paxson maintains, as one of the greatest rescue efforts, but what the locals there simply call "normal." What distinguishes that effort is the level of group involvement and the long-term duration of the activities.

After the German invasion of France in May 1940, there was an exodus to the southern portions of France. The Vichy government was established. By October 1940, anti-Semitic legislation was passed and mass deportations began. Starting in 1942, refugees were given shelter in Le Chambon sur Lignon. They numbered roughly 5000, of which 3500 were Jewish refugees fleeing deportation to concentration camps. They came from numerous European countries and for various reasons, but the inhabitants of Le Chambon sur Lignon never questioned anything, despite the enormous risk to their own safety. They opened their doors to these tired and war-torn people, saving thousands from the death camps.

World War II was not the first time that this type of effort had occurred. In the 16th century, Le Chambon sur Lignon had also sheltered Huguenots, then Catholics, followed by refugees from disaster areas in the 19th and 20th centuries. Throughout the years, the community has continued to provide asylum to those from a variety of countries even beyond Europe, including Laos, Algeria, Tibet, Chechnya, Iran, Armenia, and Dagestan.

This exceptional effort appears to be a natural response from the people of Le Chambon sur Lignon, but it is not a typical response to stress or strangers, according to Dr. Paxson. Oftentimes, a community tends to maximize self-interest and become closed to outsiders, who might pose a threat. She has noted some habits and characteristics of the people there, including: their idea of "stranger" and their openness to those in need and the prominence of "doing unto others, as you would have done unto you," both of which are apparent in how the people of Le Chambon sur Lignon provide shelter for neighbors and strangers when caught in the intense wind that periodically rips across the plateau. Another attribute is the silence about the rescue efforts. Dr. Paxson notes that the silence may be part of the attitude they have toward their actions as simply being "normal." Repeating the stories would only cause the rescue to seem out of the ordinary. Dr. Paxson's observation raises questions about how memories of the past can be preserved if they are not remembered beyond that generation.
The next generations growing up in Le Chambon sur Lignon, though, do in fact continue to live out the tradition. Children have been integral as the social bridge between cultures and generations. Often meeting and befriending one another at school, children continue to build bonds across cultural and social barriers, thereby weaving their parents and the adult community into a closer network as well. Such integration is evident in the shelter developed in Le Chambon sur Lignon, which has provided assistance to families of refugees over the past 10 years.

The events that occurred during World War II in Le Chambon sur Lignon were neither rational, nor intuitive, as demonstrated clearly by what transpired across Europe during the war. Dr. Paxson expresses the singularity of this effort in this small French town, by reminding us of how many cases of missed opportunity to do this there have been. Le Chambon sur Lignon was recognized as Righteous Among Nations for its actions during the war and continues its legacy to this day.

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