

The French Paradox and the Jews

The death in Paris on April 8, 2015 of Jean-Louis Crémieux-Brilhac, historian and member of the French resistance in World War II, has reawakened the controversy of what has been termed “the French paradox.” Although 76,000 Jews were deported from France to their death, how was it that 75% of Jews in France during the war managed to survive death at the hands of the inhumane Nazi regime, while only 20% in the Netherlands, and 55% in Belgium were able to do so?

France, in both the Occupied Zone controlled by Nazi Germany and the Unoccupied Zone run by the Vichy regime, experienced various levels and stages of persecution, resistance, and rescue. The regime was implicated by its own volition, not by Nazi coercion, in the Holocaust. Memories of that history are leading French leaders, despite problems, to present action to prevent persecution of its Jewish population.

Crémieux-Brilhac, born in Paris, came from one of the oldest assimilated Jewish families in the area of Avignon. During the war, while in the army, he was captured in June 1940 by the Germans, escaped prison, fled to the Soviet Union where he was held a prisoner until he was expatriated after the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, and was able to get to London. There he joined the Free French movement, believing, as General Charles de Gaulle had said on June 18, 1940, that the cause of France was not lost and that the flame of French resistance must not and would not die.

His life, one of moral integrity, is still important for the reminder today that the prejudicial and discriminatory policies of the Vichy regime, headed by Marshal Philippe Pétain, are not and must not be the real ideological France. Crémieux became the secretary of the propaganda committee

under de Gaulle, and was responsible, using the code name "Brilhac" which he later added to Crémieux, for providing information to be broadcast to France in the daily series of the BBC. He was one of the first people to talk of the existence of Nazi gas chambers.

Then 25 years old, Crémieux wrote the broadcast document telling the French people how to act when the Allied armies invaded France, calling for a gradual, phased insurrection in accordance with the advance of those armies, instead of a general insurrection on D Day proposed by the Communist party. He declared that all French people should consider themselves as engaged in the total war against the invader.

After the war, as a historian he was engaged in the debate about the "French Paradox." The debate, sometimes acrimonious, really focuses on three interrelated issues. What can explain the fact that "only" 25% of the 330,000 Jews living in France were deported to the Nazi death camps? Did the Vichy regime under Marshal Pétain, really try to help the 100,000 Jews who were French citizens, like Crémieux, "vieux souche" (old stock), at the price of sacrificing to the Nazis the 230,000 foreign Jews who spoke no or bad French, who were mainly impoverished, and were an easy target, and the German Jews who had fled to France when Hitler took power? And to what extent did the population of France during the war support or approve the persecution and discrimination against Jews?

Controversy on these issues, on the events and personnel of the Vichy regime, and on the different stages of French behavior during the war, has never ceased. The fact that a larger proportion of Jews were able to survive in France than in surrounding countries can be explained by a number of factors: the Allied invasion of France in June 1944; the larger size of France allowing Jews to be dispersed in the countryside; the ability of some Jews to escape to Spain and Switzerland; the fact that a national government did exist in Unoccupied France; the impact of the resistance movement; and

the tolerance and aid of an unknown number of non-Jews.

Though many French people were involved in collaboration, association, or accommodation for political or economic reasons, or because of indifference, fear or necessity, others, both individuals and voluntary organizations, were critical of the persecution of Jews. This was especially the case after the arrests of Jewish women and children in the summer of 1942, and the denunciation of that persecution by Archbishop Jules Saliège of Toulouse on August 23, 1942.

Based on the material and documentation available to it, Yad Vashem in Jerusalem has honored 3,853 French people as "Righteous among the Nations" for help or protection of Jews. Among them are the courageous inhabitants of the mountain village of Le Chambon sur-Lignon.

Did the Vichy government try to protect those Jews who were French citizens? The reality was that all Jews in both the Zones of France suffered from discrimination: anti-Jewish laws such as the October 3, 1940 *Statut des Juifs*