



PERSPECTIVES

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It Is Time to Recognize the Contribution of the Jewish Resistance in the Rescue of the Jews of France

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Although hundreds of members of the Jewish Resistance in France operated during the Nazi occupation in an autonomous and separate framework from the French resistance and contributed greatly to the rescue of three-quarters of French Jews, France and Israel have never sufficiently recognized their heroism.

Although the Jewish Resistance Organization in France carried out one of the Holocaust's most extraordinary rescue operations, the story is not well known in either France or Israel and is often distorted for political reasons. During his historic recognition in July 1995 of France's responsibility for the extermination of its Jews, President Jacques Chirac claimed that the French Righteous Among the Nations had saved three-quarters of the Jews of France—completely ignoring the central part played by the Jewish Resistance in the rescue. This version was then adopted by his successors.

There is no doubt that the French Righteous Among the Nations deserve a place of honor in the history of the Holocaust, but it was the Jewish Resistance that made the crucial contribution to the rescue of some 230,000 Jews—about three-quarters of French Jewry. Members of the Jewish Resistance were mainly the ones who initiated contact with the French rescuers, and who—often at risk of their lives—issued good-quality forged certificates and food stamps without which it would have been impossible to obtain groceries. They even maintained regular contact with the hidden children in order to boost their morale and prevent their loss to the Jewish people. They assisted detainees in the camps and smuggled them away; they moved convoys of children and adults to hiding places in France, Switzerland and Spain; and they set up guerrilla groups and transferred funds for the sake of the struggle against the Nazi occupier.

Despite the existence of extensive documentation regarding the independent activities of the Jewish resistance movement, the French media and politicians continue to adhere to the erroneous story that the movement operated within the framework of the general French Resistance. In practice, not only did the general French Resistance not engrave on its banner the rescue of the Jews as part of its struggle for the liberation of the French homeland, but the first nucleus of the Jewish Resistance was established as early as June 1940 with the Nazi occupation while the general French Resistance movement formed more slowly.

The gap between historical facts and the public memory led, among other things, to false theories, such as the claim of French-Jewish writer and publicist Éric Zemmour that it must have been the Vichy government that enabled the rescue of three-quarters of French Jews, since the small number of Righteous Among the Nations could not explain it. Zemmour, who was probably unaware of the efforts of the Jewish resistance, claimed that the Vichy regime did not want to harm the Jewish citizens of France and therefore made a "deal with the devil" to rescue them.

It is not only the French media who are ignorant of the contribution of the Jewish resistance to the rescue of the Jews of France. For example, a film was recently released that presents the well-known mime Marcel Marceau as the savior of hundreds of Jews during the French resistance, a theory supported by a blog post on the Jerusalem National Library website. Marceau did, in fact, help transfer Jewish children to Switzerland, but he did so within the framework of the Jewish Resistance and the vital infrastructure it had established including forged certificates, money supply, connections with border smugglers and heads of local authorities, and more.

The French authorities have created the misconception that it was the Righteous Among the Nations who saved three-quarters of French Jewry as a counterweight of sorts to their accepting national responsibility for the fate of French Jews during the Holocaust. But it is historically and morally wrong to erase from the collective memory the crucial contribution of the Jewish resistance in this rescue operation, for which many of them paid with their lives. It is time for the State of Israel, which is so sensitive to the memory of the Holocaust, to honor the contribution of this unique Jewish resistance movement in a national project alongside the French Righteous Among the Nations project and oppose the growing trend of erasing heroic chapters from Holocaust history or even rewriting history for political or ideological ends.

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