

Women in the Jewish Resistance in France

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Background

Jewish Resistance activities in France during World War II constitute a unique chapter in the history of the Holocaust. This is due, in part, to its organized activities that lasted from June 1940 until the end of the occupation period, as well as its numerous rescue activities and operations.

This article opens with a presentation of the key moments in the history of the Holocaust of the Jews of France. It continues with a brief presentation of the nine Jewish resistance networks in France and their diverse rescue activities and focuses on the particular contribution of female members of the Jewish resistance in France to the rescue activities. Women accounted for about forty percent of the members of the Jewish resistance and performed equally dangerous missions as their male comrades. The general display of these women's impressive contribution is followed by a handful of specific examples (out of hundreds), illustrating how certain clandestine missions of women in the Jewish resistance could be performed more effectively by them than by their male comrades, due to the unique and tragic circumstances of the Holocaust in France.

The Holocaust in France

On May 10, 1940, the Germans attacked France. Within a month they were at the gates of Paris. On June 22, 1940, the armistice agreement was signed and France was divided into two regions: the northern region was placed under direct control of the Germans while the southern region, the so called "Free French" region, was led by Marshal Philippe Pétain, with the city of Vichy as its capital. The demarcation line bisecting the two regions passed from Bordeaux in the west to Geneva in the east.

Only a small handful of French responded to Charles de Gaulle's call from his exile in London to oppose the Germans. The resistance movement in France began to gradually gain the French public's support only after events such as the German occupation of the Vichy region in November 1942, the compulsory work service and deportation of numerous young French who were forced to work for the German war effort (September 1942), as well as the first tangible German defeats in North Africa (November 1942) and in Stalingrad (February 1943). However, it was clear that the French resistance movement, which embraced the goal of liberating French territory at some point in the future, did not answer the urgent need to rescue the Jews of France. Shortly after the occupation, the Germans started persecuting the Jews in France. In September 1940, with the cooperation of the French police, they conducted mass arrests of Jews, first arresting non-French Jewish refugees and then rounding up French Jewish citizens. The detainees were sent to internment camps such as Drancy and Compiègne, where they suffered from starvation and dire sanitary conditions, inevitably leading to high mortality rates.

In March 1942 the Germans began deporting Jews to Auschwitz. In July 1942, the Germans, assisted by French policemen, carried out the notorious roundups, during which approximately 12,000 Jews, including women and children, were packed into the Paris “Winter Velodrome” (“Vel d’Hiv”-Vélodrome d’Hiver) in the summer heat without food, water and sanitary facilities. They were transferred to Drancy and from there to Auschwitz. In the south, the Vichy authorities published the "Law of Jews" on October 3, 1940, which defined "Who is a Jew" and set up decrees for the removal of Jews from all French political, economic and social life. The Vichy authorities deported foreign Jews to internment camps in southern France such as Gurs, Riversalt, Recebedo, where the detainees suffered from starvation and severe sanitary conditions, invariably leading to mass loss of life.

The Vichy authorities also established organizations which were tasked with expanding and monitoring anti-Semitic decrees. In March 1941, the "General Commission for Jewish Affairs (Commissariat Général aux Questions Juives-GCQJ) was established and not long after, in November 1941, the "General Union of the Jews of France” (Union Générale des Israélites de France-UGIF) was created. With the German occupation of the southern Vichy region in November 1942 and the German invasion of the Italian occupied region in South-Eastern France in September 1943, all French Jews effectively came under direct German rule. Overnight, the Jews became targets of intensive manhunts and immediate deportation to the extermination camps in the East. It is estimated that on the eve of the occupation there were about 300,000 Jews in France, as well as some 30,000 additional refugees from countries that had been occupied by the Germans. In total, 76,000 Jews - almost a quarter of French Jewry - were murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators in France. The disaster would have been more severe had it not been for Jewish Resistance networks in France which were set up with the main objective of rescuing their persecuted Jewish brethren.

The Jewish Resistance and its rescue activities

Altogether, there were nine main resistance networks at the center of the rescue operation. Each was established as a separate and autonomous organization, but they frequently cooperated in the various rescue activities and members of one network were often affiliated with one or more networks. The most prominent groups were the Jewish Army (Armée Juive-AJ) the Jewish Scouts (Eclaireurs Israélites de France-EIF) and their clandestine branch “The Sixth” (Le Sixième), the Organization of Assistance for Children (l’Œuvre de Secours Aux Enfants- OSE) and their clandestine branch, the “Garel group”, and the Movement of the Zionist Youth (Mouvement de Jeunesse Sioniste -MJS). There were also smaller networks such as the Moussa Abadi group, the André Group, the Amelot Street Committee (Comité de la rue Amelot), the Dutch Group (le Groupe Hollandaise) and the Rabbis of the Detention Camps in France (Les Rabbins de Camps). These networks gradually united under an umbrella organization called the Jewish Combat Organization (Organisation Juive de Combat-OJC). The uniqueness of the OJC lay in its organized clandestine work, designed to rescue Jews. They also set the goal that in due time, they would fight alongside the French resistance against the Nazis and their French collaborators for the liberation of the French territory.

During the war, members of the various OJC groups cooperated in a wide range of activities: providing assistance to detainees, smuggling them out of detention camps, locating hiding places for them, producing forged documents and distributing them to the persecuted Jews, setting up guerrillas groups in central French cities and “Maquis” guerrillas groups in the south of France, transferring money for the various needs of clandestine activities and transferring convoys of children and adults to Switzerland and Spain. Finally, following the Allied invasion in June 1944, they took part in the combat operations alongside the Allied forces, within the framework of the general French resistance until the final German capitulation. Women participated alongside their male comrades in all the various combat actions.

Due to the clandestine nature of the OJC's activities, it is impossible to determine the exact number of the OJC members. In the Polonski Archives (Avraham Polonski, was a senior commander of the AJ, who conferred his archives to the writer), there is a list of about 2000 names of OJC members. However, there are also several lower estimates. For the same reason, it is not possible to determine the exact number of French Jews who were rescued by the members of the OJC. It is possible, however, to estimate, that many thousands of French Jews were rescued, either directly or indirectly, thanks to the organized, constant and varied activity of the Jewish Resistance. This can be concluded, inter alia, from reports and oral testimonies related to the massive manufacture and distribution of forged documents.

Clandestine rescue was very dangerous. In fact, the members of the resistance, men and women, could have lived in relative security with their forged documents. However, they constantly risked their lives while accomplishing their rescue missions: passing through the numerous checkpoints of the Nazis or the Vichy regime with large amounts of money, forged documents or food coupons. They also risked their lives while searching through the French villages and cities for the assistance of local clergypersons, mayors and other local employees, not knowing in advance whether these people would denounce them or help them. They also risked their lives while transferring convoys of children and adults through the Swiss border or through the Pyrenees to Spain. More than two hundred of them were captured, tortured, executed or sent to the death camps. They proved their resilience and heroism when they did not reveal the names of their commanders and comrades or the names and hiding places of the people they rescued. This was evident from the fact that their capture did not lead to the capture of other people in the network.

Women in the Jewish Resistance

The contribution of hundreds of female members of the Jewish resistance was crucial in the rescue efforts. As already noted, women accounted for about 40% of the members of the Jewish resistance. Many of them were the second generation in France, born to Jewish parents from Eastern Europe. They were integrated in the French society while keeping their ties to their Jewish communities. These were usually elegant, chic young women who looked like French women in every respect and spoke French as natives. Some of them were from the ex-German territories of Alsace-Lorraine, and spoke German as well, which proved helpful in their

clandestine activities. There were also numerous French-speaking women from Belgium, who fled to France, as well as German-speaking women from the Netherlands, such as Paula Kaufman, who produced forged Gestapo documents. Paula Kaufman worked at the Gestapo's Paris headquarters and delivered information and forged documents to her comrades, until she was exposed and sent to Auschwitz, which she also survived.

Initially, women aroused less suspicion than their male comrades, and their Jewish identity could not be proven as easily as their circumcised comrades. Consequently, they were assigned to particularly dangerous missions: transferring weapons, transferring large sums of money for the diverse rescue operations and producing and transferring forged documents. They were also assigned to the particularly sensitive role of moving groups of children, separated from their parents, to hiding places in France, Switzerland or Spain. Women such as Régine-Ariane Knout also carried out military training for young people at the *A.J. Maquis* guerrilla groups in the south of France. Additionally, women such as Rachel Cheigam, Nelly Villers and Betty Knout participated in the fights for the liberation of Paris in August 1944. Throughout the clandestine operations, women demonstrated their ability to react with resourcefulness and calm when confronted with extremely dangerous unexpected situations, successfully accomplishing their missions.

Stories of Women in the Jewish Resistance

The limited scope of the article does not provide a chance to present the amazing and heroic accomplishments of each of the hundreds women in the Jewish resistance. However, the following individual stories illustrate just some of the experiences of many women rescuers in the Jewish resistance, including those who were captured and lost their lives while performing their missions. In fact, women account for about twenty five percent of the two hundred Jewish resistance members who lost their lives during their rescue missions.

Mila Racine and Marianne Cohn

Mila Racine (alias: Marie-Anne Richmond) and Marianne Cohn (alias: Marianne Colin), both members of the MJS, carried out diverse rescue and assistance missions for Jewish adults and children during the Holocaust in France. They proved their courage while performing their dangerous missions and particularly while transferring convoys of children to Switzerland through the Germans' dense border patrols. Both of them were captured by the Nazis (Mila Racine in September 1943 and Marianne Cohn in May 1944) while transferring groups of children across the Swiss border. In fact, Marianne Cohn replaced Mila Racine after Mila's capture. Withstanding the intensive cruel inhuman tortures by the Nazis, they proved their resilience and did not reveal the names of their colleagues and commanders. Moreover, they rejected their comrades' proposals to rescue them, fearing that the Nazis would take revenge on the children who had been captured with them. Mila Racine was killed at the age of 24 during an Allied bombardment of the Mauthausen concentration camp, just on the eve of its liberation. Marianne Cohn was executed by the Gestapo at the age of 23 on the night between July 3 and 4,

1944, about one month before the region's liberation. Mila Racine's group of children was gradually liberated from the German prison thanks to the efforts of Jean Deffaugh, the mayor of Annemasse (recognized as a Righteous Among the Nations). Cohn's group of children also survived the war, appearing in the famous moving photo after the liberation of Annemasse. Their Jewish rescuers, members of the Jewish Resistance, are also in the photo. Among them, both in military uniforms are Georges Loinger and Emanuel Racine, Mila Racine's brother and Mila and Marianne's commander. Mila and Marianne became national heroines in France and were decorated with military medals. They were also decorated with the citation of Jewish rescuers by the World Center of B'nai Brith and the Committee for the recognition of Jews who rescued Jews (JRJ) during the Holocaust.

Frida Wattenberg

Frida Wattenberg (alias: Thérèse Verdier) was a member of three networks: the OSE, the MJS, and the AJ. She accomplished numerous rescue missions in various areas in France including leading convoys of children to Switzerland. Her life was in constant danger and many times she was miraculously saved. As early as 1940, at the age of sixteen, she joined the Victor Hugo School's Gaullist underground cell and pasted advertisements, urging teenagers to resist. She ran an OSE site for children's leisure activities on Rosier Street in Paris, so that they would not play outdoors, where they were exposed to the danger of being arrested by the Germans. Along with Joseph Migneret, the head of "Hospitaliers-Saint-Gervais" school, she forged documents for numerous Jewish children.

In July 1942, she managed to rescue her mother from the infamous Drancy detention camp and organized her escape to southern France with forged documents. When the Germans were about to arrest her, Frida fled to the Italian region of occupied France, where, she was recruited by Sacha Racine-Maidenberg of the MJS, the sister of Emanuel and Mila Racine. Due to her "non-Jewish" look she was charged with dangerous missions, such as leading groups of children to Annemasse, and from there across the border to Switzerland. She moved to Grenoble and worked there in the framework of the MJS under the command of Otto Giniewski –Dr. Eitan Guinat (alias: Toto) and afterwards under the command of Georges Schnek. She was sent on missions to obtain "genuine-fake" documents in the Savoie and Isère regions. These documents seemed genuine as they included the seals of the municipalities, and the forged names of the Jews were included in the municipalities' lists. These missions were extremely dangerous as it was impossible to know in advance whether the municipal officials collaborated with the Nazis and the Vichy regime.

Frida also was a contact person for the dangerous missions of transferring money for the diverse underground activities. She was aware of the fact that the Germans immediately tortured and executed or deported those captured in this kind of activities. That what happened to Edith Pulver of the EIF, who was captured in February 1944 with documents and money while on a mission with Marc Hageneau, commander of the "Sixième", who was shot to death while attempting to escape. Edith was tortured and sent to Auschwitz, where she perished. In September 1943, Frida was very close to falling into a Gestapo trap when she arrived in Nice with a suitcase full with money. On the same day, Jacques Weintrob, who was in charge of the

MJS clandestine group, was captured along with another comrade, sent to Drancy, and afterwards to Auschwitz. Frida could have easily been captured as well, as she was most likely on her way to hand the money to Weintrob while the Nazis were already following him.

This incident shows how often survival depended not only on personal capabilities but also on hazardous circumstances. The severe blow to the Jewish resistance did not deter Frida from pursuing her mission. She handed over the money to Henri Pohorilès, who replaced Weintrob, money that was used to help rescue Jews during the mass arrests conducted by Alois Brunner in Nice. As a precautionary measure, Frida was subsequently sent to Toulouse where she carried out clandestine missions in the framework of the AJ. She collected clothes and shoes, stolen from Petainist Youth sites, for the rescue operations of passage to Spain through the steep and cold Pyrenees. She provided food to prisoners of forced labor in Port de Bordeaux, who were working to set up a submarine base for the Germans. Her life was saved again when she managed to escape after receiving the warning that the Gestapo was on her track. She was then sent to the Haut Garonne region where, together with the AJ members Leon Roitman and Joseph (Jo) Fox, she assisted Jews in distress. During the battles for the liberation of France she was sent to Clermont-Ferrand in the mission of seizing files of the General Commission of Jewish Affairs (UJIF), which documented the mass arrests and deportation of Jews to the death camps.

After the liberation, she continued in her rescue missions, when she was sent by Polonski, the AJ leader, to search for Jewish children who had been hidden by Christians and to bring them to the orphanages of the “Organization for Protecting Jewish Children” ((l’Œuvre de Protection des Enfants Juifs- OPEJ), set up by the AJ. In 1947 Frida immigrated to pre-State Israel while it was still under the British mandate and joined the battle for the State's creation. She returned to France in 1951 and was active in commemorating the Holocaust of French Jewry as well as that of the Jewish resistance in France, volunteering to collect the biographies of the members of the Resistance into a book. Earning the status of a national heroine in France, she was often interviewed by the media. Having been decorated with the French medals of the resistance combatants and later with the prestigious “Chévalier de l’ordre nationale du mérite”, in September 2019 she was awarded the “Jewish rescuer” citation by the B'nai Brith World Center in Jerusalem and the Committee for recognizing the Jews who saved Jews in the Holocaust. Frida Wattenberg passed away in April 2020 of the corona virus, a few days before her 96th birthday.

Sabine Roitman

Sabine-Shulamit Roitman- Einhorn (alias: Simonne Estienne) was a member of the MJS in Grenoble since late 1942. Her brother, her sisters, her future husband and his two brothers were also members of the Jewish resistance in France. Sabine’s mission focused mainly on producing “Genuine Fake” documents that saved the lives of many Jews. Her missions included contacting mayors and municipal secretaries, who were ready to assist in affixing municipal seals on the forged documents and the inclusion of the fake names on their residents list. Sabine and her comrades could never be certain whether the people they contacted were also collaborating with

the enemy. Usually these missions were carried out in pairs, one man and one woman, a tactic that often created a romantic and non-threatening façade for the enemy.

In October 1943, Sabine Roitman together with Asher Michaeli (alias: Ado), also a member of the MJS, were sent on a routine but dangerous mission of contacting municipal secretaries in small villages in the Isère area in order to obtain “Genuine Fake” documents. This type of underground mission that saved the lives of thousands Jews in France required significant physical and mental capabilities. The two rode their bicycles over the steep difficult roads and succeeded in obtaining the desired documents, however on their way back, Sabine fell off her bike on a steep mountain descent and was wounded, making it necessary to stop at a doctor’s house to bandage the injuries. Consequently, they had to stay overnight in the village, itself a danger. The next day they took the bus back to Grenoble, where they were supposed to hand the forged documents to another comrade of the resistance, but due to Sabine’s injuries, she remained in a nearby café. Unfortunately, Asher was also wounded in an exchange of gunfire between a police officer and a French resistance member but before he was taken to the hospital, he managed to hide the fake documents and succeeded in relaying to Sabine where they were hidden. Sabine located the documents and forwarded them to the contact agent. The police officer who took Ado to the hospital apologized for wounding him, but also began to question him suspiciously. On the other hand, no one suspected Sabine, who came to the location where the shooting occurred, collected the documents and handed them to the contact agent of the MJS while demonstrating outward calm, resourcefulness and courage. Sabine continued to produce forged documents until the liberation of Grenoble in August 1944.

Renée Levy

In June 1940 Renée and Dr. Gaston Levy fled Paris to the Vichy “free zone” with their only daughter Annette (Chouraqui). Dr. Gaston Levy, a pediatrician, took care of children and their families and helped to free Jews from the detention camps in southern France. In addition, he was in charge of OSE children’s houses in the Limoges region and his wife Renée assisted him with his activities for the children in the framework of OSE, and later on when he hid Jewish children and youth. Both of them risked their lives in their overt and clandestine activities. The Gastons lived in a house near Limoges and sent their young daughter to Renée’s parents, so as not to endanger her as well.

In 1943 a messenger arrived at the Gastons’ house and informed Renée about two urgent rescue missions. The first was to warn those in charge of the children’s home in Masgelier to hide a fifteen-year-old girl, since the Nazis were about to arrest her and send her to join her parents in the Riversalt detention camp. The second mission was to pass on an urgent message that the Nazis were about to arrest Jewish children in an ostensive "camp of Protestant scouts" near Bourganeuf. According to the message, the children had to leave the camping place immediately and take a train to Avignon, where someone would wait for their arrival and take them to a secure place. Since Renée was alone in the house, she understood that she had to carry out both urgent missions and carry the message to two places, a half-hour train ride from each other.

In the absence of transport from her house near Limoges, she walked to the train station in Limoges. After an hour and a half of train travel, she reached Masgelier and delivered her message. She then decided intuitively not to take a direct train to Bourgneuf for her second mission but to first return by train to Limoges and continue from there to Bourgneuf. When her train stopped at an intersection she saw a group of scouts on another train that stopped on the opposite direction who turned out to be the scouts who had fled the camp. Luckily, the person whom she addressed was the one to whom the warning had to be passed. He told her that following an alert they escaped by train, but they did not know where to go. At that point she forwarded the message about the person waiting for them at the Avignon train station.

Renée Levy summed up the affair by saying, "We went through many odd situations, but that one was the most peculiar". In retrospect, her intuitive decision seemed to be the right one. Had she chosen to take the train directly to Bourgneuf and not travelled through Limoges, she might have fallen into the Gestapo's trap and the children's chances of being rescued would have been undermined. After being given an urgent warning by the governor of the region, Renée, her husband and Annette managed to escape from the Gestapo, crossing the border into Switzerland in two separate convoys. Gaston, Annette and his mother were transferred across the border by Marianne Cohn on May 23, 1944. They miraculously survived when German soldiers were about to shoot at them. This was only a few days before Marianne Cohn was captured. Renée and her parents crossed the border a few days later.

Gisèle Roman

Gisèle's story is another illustration of the courage and devotion of women in the resistance, as well as the added value of successful intuitive decisions taken in urgent and uncertain situations. Gisèle and other women in the resistance played a crucial role in the rescue operations of passing clandestine convoys of children to Spain. In the spring of 1944, The AJ in Toulouse established the "SERE" (Service d'Evacuation et de Régroupement des Enfants), designed to regroup and evacuate children first to Spain and from there to pre-State Israel. The idea was that of Andrée Salomon, the head of the OSE-Garel Social Service, who organized and coordinated the rescue activities of hundreds of children by OSE's social workers. When the passage to Switzerland became too dangerous and in fact impossible, Andrée Salomon convinced the AJ to organize the rescue convoys of children to Spain. In fact, the AJ was already operating since autumn 1943 with its SER organization which transferred convoys of adults to Spain. Andrée Salomon was in charge of bringing the convoys of children to Toulouse, the city from where the convoys left for Spain.

Gisèle Roman, an AJ member, was nominated to take charge of the convoys of children between seven and twelve years old. Régine-Ariane Knout took charge of the convoys of children over 12, until she was killed in an exchange of fire with the French militia on July 22, 1944. The train ride towards the Spanish border was very dangerous due to strict German controls. In addition, a vast area along the Spanish border was declared by the Germans as forbidden for passage and thus, the convoys had to cross the steep, cold Pyrenees by foot with the help of smugglers. Transferring the children to Spain was complicated and dangerous because of the fear that they might expose their Judaism in a random spontaneous conversation.

For that reason, Gisèle used to scatter the children of the convoys throughout the train so as not to attract attention. The children's belongings were in one suitcase and in another suitcase there were two dismantled submachine guns for the smugglers who transferred them to the Spanish border.

In her testimony after the war, Gisèle recounted that three days before the liberation of Toulouse, she spent the night with a group of thirteen children in a safe apartment in the city. Avraham Polonski (alias: Monsieur Pol), the experienced AJ leader, thought that she should stay in the apartment and not leave for her dangerous destination at the Spanish border, since the region's liberation appeared near. Gisèle felt that staying at the apartment was risky for the children and convinced Polonski that she had to leave the apartment. Gisèle left the apartment with the children at 3 AM, boarding the 4 AM train that stopped at Perpignan, as the area was already a battle zone. The group made its way by foot to Roux, where they met the smuggler, crossed the Pyrenees and reached Lerida in Spain. Tragically, Gisèle later discovered that she had been correct: the Germans had raided the apartment in the morning. One of the building's residents later told her that the owner of the café opposite the building had informed on them. Many years after the liberation, Gisèle still woke up at night with nightmares that the Germans were capturing the children.

This article has briefly underlined the significant role of women in the rescue activities in the framework of the Jewish resistance in France. Women, like their male comrades, performed their rescue missions with absolute dedication and devotion throughout the Nazi occupation. They displayed their resilience and bravery during numerous, perilous operations in which they were tasked with an enormous responsibility for the lives of children and adults. Time and again they were exposed to the heartbreaking scenes of little children being torn from their parents who had entrusted their dear ones to the hands of their young rescuers. However, they persisted in accomplishing their rescue missions despite the extraordinary stress of their clandestine daily activities. Aware of the fact that the enemy was increasing its efforts to capture the Jewish rescuers, they had to be in a state of permanent vigilance, even when asleep.

Arousing less suspicious than their male comrades as they could easier hide their Judaism, women were able to accomplish certain dangerous missions that were more difficult for men, giving their rescue activities a significant added value. At the end of the war, many of them continued their mission as volunteers in the service of the Jewish people: caring for the orphan children, helping the survivors who returned to France from the death camps, contributing to the reconstruction of the ravaged French Jewish community. They also joined the struggle for the creation of a Jewish state, bringing convoys of Nazis survivors to France and from there, joining the clandestine immigration to pre-State Israel, including on the Exodus 1947, the famous ship full of illegal immigrants. These women helped set up the radio contacts for the use of the clandestine Zionist activities in France, established military training camps in France, and transferred arms to pre-State Israel. Veterans of the Jewish resistance, women, men, and couples moved to Israel, participated in its War of Independence, and contributed to the establishment of the new State in all the areas of life.