

Blue Curtain, Stories of war, Jews and Vichy France

by

Sandell Morse

(hybrid essays)

Chapter One

Hidden Messages

2011. I'd been awarded a residency at Moulin à Nef, an artists' retreat in Auvillar, a village in south west France. For weeks I walked Auvillar's cobbled streets, searching for signs of the Second World War. I looked for a plaque honoring soldiers who had fought in the First World War. Usually, villages had added names of Resistance fighters to that that plaque. There weren't many veterans of the Second World War. France's defeat had been swift and ignominious. Still, often a plaque referenced a brief skirmish. There was unspoken history here. I felt it. Some villages honored those who had hidden Jews. This was my interest, hidden Jewish children.

I was toddler, then a young child during the time of the Second World War, living with Mama, my grandmother, Papa, my grandfather, my mother and my father in a yellow stucco house in Morristown, New Jersey. I remembered blue ration stamps,

victory gardens and blackouts. I remembered pitch dark outside. Inside, too. On those fall days of early dark, I wrapped my slim body inside a long blue drape. I can still feel the curtain's heavy fabric, still see Mama's thick fingers parting the slats of a Venetian blind, her face in profile as she stared through the opening, searching for her vanishing world.

I would never find Mama's vanishing world. She came from a place she called Russ-Poland, and that world had been buried in mass graves or gone up in the smoke of Nazi crematoriums. But what of Auvillar? A friend told me to seek out Madame F. in the *marie*, the town hall. Her family was known to have sheltered Jews. We stood at a high counter, she on one side, me on the other. Madame F. had short blond hair, a brisk business like manner. She shook her head, "*Rien de plus.*"

I understood. No longer. "But where?" I asked. "Where did they live?"

She pointed. "*La.*"

We were speaking of *la famille Hirsch*. I was Sandell Hirsch, now Morse. Sometime early in the nineteenth century in Héricourt, France, a town in the Alsace (Franche-Comté), Jacques Hirsch married Henriette Ducas. The couple emigrated to New York City, and one of their eight children became my great-grandfather. Was I related to *la famille Hirsch*? Probably not. Still, our matching names hooked me.

I looked through a large store front window at the round market, an unusual structure with pillars and a tile roof. The rest was open to the air. If Auvillar had a town square, this would be it, a cobblestone area not large enough to be a plaza or small enough to be ignored. Sunday mornings, I would leave the Old Port where I was staying and trudge up a steep hill. Here, I strolled among villagers, all of us buying ripe tomatoes

and ripe figs—cheese from the cheese man—and I wondered. Who among you lived here then? Who among you knew stories?

Vaulted colonnades surrounded the market on all sides. Under the colonnades doorways led to restaurants, shops and houses. The Hirsch family had lived in one of those houses. I turned back to Madame F. Could she give me a number? I was too late. She'd left her place at the counter and seated herself at her desk. Taking up a pen, she lowered her head and she wrote.

Days later, I joined a tour of the village with Monsieur D., an historian. Perhaps, he would tell me the story of *la famille* Hirsch. I was particularly interested in Jean Hirsch, a young boy who had been a courier for the Resistance. Now, standing inside the massive *église de St-Pierre*, a structure that seemed strangely elegant and out of place in this village, I looked up at crystal chandeliers and cords with naked light bulbs. How strange, naked light bulbs and chandeliers. Neither fit, not the light bulbs or the chandeliers that seemed to belong in someone's aristocratic dining room.

I slipped into a back pew. Monsieur D., spoke in rapid, accented English. Yes, this was a grand church with its high vaulted ceilings, stained glass, keystones, paintings and icons. Perhaps, too grand for this village, Monsieur D. said. But once, Auvillar had been a center of commerce. Once, a priest had said Mass, here, every day. Now, an itinerant priest said Mass once a month. Monsieur D. joked, Auvillar was lucky. The priest was young, only seventy-five. Once, too, this village was home to both a Benedictine and a Dominican monastery and to an Ursuline convent in the hills. Now, those buildings sat empty. Had those monks or nuns sheltered a Jewish child? Perhaps, the young Jean Hirsch.

More than sixty years after the Second World War, people were closed mouthed about this history, not only here in Auvillar—in all of France. That stunning defeat of 1940 and subsequent German Occupation still cast its long shadow of humiliation and shame. As for anti-Semitism, well, a German friend once said to me, “Anti-Semitism in Europe is an old story, eh?” What he didn’t say, but what I understood was that anti-Semitism was built into France’s Catholic culture.

Inside that darkened church, I remembered an Easter morning long ago. I was a college senior, going to Mass with Andy, my Catholic boyfriend, listening to a priest rail against Jews. We were Christ killers. Beyond salvation. I rose from the pew as if pulled by an invisible string, made my way to the aisle, and I left. On a grassy knoll, I stood under a wide branching tree feeling as alone as I’d felt in my life. Not that I hadn’t heard the accusation before, but I hadn’t expected the rant to be included in the Mass. I took a cigarette from a pack. Andy appeared. He offered a light. Wordlessly, we drove to a diner. Days before, Andy proposed marriage. I was considering not only marrying him, but his one condition: our children would be raised Catholic. In a booth, I gripped my white mug filled with steaming mug coffee with both hands. “I can’t, Andy. I just can’t.”

I swirled up from reverie, rose and followed Monsieur D. and the rest of the tour group into sunlight. Walking single file, we passed through a narrow passage. Old stone buildings dating from the Middle Ages walled us in. I thought about footsteps that had fallen here before mine, perhaps a Roman soldier or a woman selling cider to a Crusader. Perhaps, a French Resistance fighter, a hunted Jew or Communist. Prime Minister Marshall Pétain looked right toward Hitler, not left toward the Allies. He targeted

communists, socialists and anyone who was not—in his view—traditionally French. As for Jews, Pétain did not only the Nazi's bidding, but his own.

On that mid-September day, I followed Monsieur D., the air was cool, the sun warm. Monsieur D. walked, briskly. I walked briskly. Together, we emerged from that narrow passage and stood together on a large empty plot of land. The group had not yet reassembled. This was my moment. I approached my subject, obliquely. "Monsieur, I was wondering, did Jews live in Auvillar during the days of the Benedictine and Dominican monks? What about during the Second World War?"

"Je ne sais pas."

How was it he didn't know? He knew about the Huguenot Lords, the Catholic populace, the religious wars, Huguenots (Protestants) fighting Catholics, wars that destroyed the cathedral and the chateau, a massive structure that once stood here, on this empty square. I wanted to say more, but Monsieur D. was craning his head in that way of tour guides and motioning to the group. I stood apart under the leaves of a chestnut tree and listened. Monsieur D. spoke of a grand chateau that had been destroyed during those religious wars and never rebuilt. The church, though, had grown larger and more grand. "So you see..." Monsieur D. said, his voice dropping off.

I did see. The *Comte*, Earl, of this vanished chateau lost his battle. Power and victory lay with the Church. Lingered in the shade of this tree, I thought of the Catholic Church and its controversial wartime history. Officially, the church was neutral. Pope Pious XII never spoke out about Nazi treatment of the Jews. Yet, many nuns and priests protected Jews. This was what interested me, individual agency, those who helped, those who resisted, both Jews and non Jews. I would learn in my research and in my quest that

small acts of kindness and compassion often meant the difference between life and death. Empathy. Who among us had it?

I caught up with the group at the market. In front of *Le Baladin*, a restaurant and inn, men and women sat at outdoor tables, drinking wine and beer. A few drank coffee. Most smoked. Always, people smoked. No one hurried. In Auvillar, time unfurled like a long coiled ribbon. This was one of the one of the reasons I would return again and again. I liked this languid flow of time, my long morning walks, my trips to the boulangerie arriving before noon or after the long mid-day closure. I loved Auvillar's quiet streets, many too narrow for cars. I loved the river. Often as I strolled, I remembered summer days of my childhood when time was infinite. Monsieur D. seemed an anomaly, here, with his quickness and his darting eyes. Yet, he was so French, telling this group only the history he wanted us to know and nothing more. He avoided my questions. He had that particular French evasiveness.

A low stone wall surrounded the market. I sat there, half listening as Monsieur D. spoke of an earlier market at this site, one dating from the Middle Ages. He spoke of an underground silo. Auvillar was on the pilgrims' route to Santiago de Compostela, Spain. Then and now, pilgrims walked here. Could Jews have lived in this village in the days of the Romans? The Crusades? Probably not. Mostly, Jews settled in lands around the Mediterranean, far to the east. But later, at the time of the Inquisition, Jews leaving Spain might have passed through. Possibly stayed? That underground silo. A hiding place? During the Inquisition? During the Second World War? Opposite me, was the row of houses where Madame F. had pointed that day. I stood, abruptly, and I approached

Monsieur D., my French, suddenly, fluent, or so I thought. "*Monsieur, quel maison etait la maison de la famille Hirsch.*"

For a fraction of a second, his clear blue eyes pierced the air between us. Did he know I was Jewish? Did he care? He looked past my shoulder. I was sure my accent was thick; yet, I was also certain he understood: which house? Sigismond Hirsch, Jean's father had been a doctor. I insisted. "*Le docteur. Le medecin.*"

"Ah," he says, moving an index finger in front of his eyes like a metronome. "*Rien de plus.*"

An echo of Madame F. No more.

"Yes. I understand. But which house? I would like to know which house."

He pointed.

I was close enough to read the number. "*Nombre trois?*"

"*Oui, oui,*" he said, impatiently. "*Nombre trois.*"

At number three, a pair of windows lined with sheer white curtains were thrown open. In this village, windows did not have screens or glass. I looked into a living room. A drum set with cymbals sat in a corner. A man at a table bent toward a newspaper. An opened rear door gave me a clear view into a garden where roses bloomed and vines climbed an arbor. Life was like that, here, stone houses with fortress-like exteriors walling off inner gardens. I would see only a fraction of life in this village. Learn only a fraction of what I wanted to know. I snapped a photo, prepared to take another when a woman approached from within. She reached outside and closed the windows as if they were shutters. I stared at white lacy curtains. This was the house. This was the door. The

Hirsch family had been asleep in their beds when the Gestapo arrived. This was what I believed. What I knew then.

*

In the Old Port buildings had names, *Maison Vieilhescazes*, the residence of the artists' retreat, *Le Cebo*, the building that housed our studios. *Le Cebo* meant onion in Occitan, the old language. How fitting for my work here, to work in a building named for an onion, all of those layers to peel away until I reached a tender, translucent center. At my desk, I surfed the internet. Via websites such as: "The Jewish Virtual Library," "The Traveling Rabbi" and Wikipedia, I learned that the English ruled in this region from 1152 until 1453, and that Jews were subject to the British expulsion of 1290. Perhaps, those Jews traveled to Spain. Or to Turkey. Later, the Spanish Inquisition sent Jews packing, again.

My people traveled in ancient times, whole populations forced out, invited back. I imagined dusty roads with wooden carts, men and women walking beside them, carrying babies and leading children. Perhaps, a family had stopped in Auvillar, converted to Christianity, and over centuries blended in. Perhaps, they became Conversos, hidden Jews, lighting *shabbos* candles in dark basements or behind closed shutters. Perhaps, their progeny were still here.

Jews flourished inside the Islamic Empire (700-1200 CE) as poets, scholars, scientists, statesmen and philosophers, and at relatively the same time, Jews were free and mostly prosperous in Christian Europe. Then, the Crusades began, ushering in a long period of persecution. France's first blood libel, the false accusation that Jews killed Christian children and used their blood to make Passover matzo, took place in 1171 in

Blois, a town five hundred kilometers north of Auvillar. Thirty-one Jews were burned at the stake.

In my studio, I leaned outside my window opened window and breathed air. As always, I'd fastened my blue shutters to the outside of the building. All was clear: an asphalt parking lot across the street, a grassy park, tree tops, a picnic table beside the green Garonne, a river that had lost its commerce long ago to dug canals. The water was nearly still, concealing a ferocious current that, recently, took a whole family to their deaths. They'd been canoeing. They'd capsized. No one to save them.

On an island in the river, a lone fisherman cast his line catching light, and in that light, I saw a glass. A window. I was a senior in college approaching that window, then ringing a door bell. I entered a house. The house belonged to our college president, a man we affectionately called Prexy. Every Monday evening, ten seniors sat on couches, chairs and floor in Prexy's living room. We were taking a course listed in the catalog as the History of Western Civilization, to us Prexy's course. You had to apply to get in. I applied. I got in.

Gripping his pipe, Prexy sat in a wing backed chair. I sat on the Persian carpet at his feet as Prexy led us through history, the Greeks, the Romans, then western Europe and, of course, Christianity. It wasn't until years later when I realized my own people had been erased from this history. Not having had a Jewish education or an affiliation with a synagogue growing up, I assumed I had no history worth reading about in a secular setting.

No history at home either. Mama and Papa refused to talk about the place they called "the old country." "Feh," Mama would say spitting into the air as if to ward off

evil spirits. Papa claimed he was too young to know. He'd arrived in New York City, a toddler in his mother's arms.

My father knew nothing of *his* family's life in Héricourt, France, except those two names: Henriette Ducas and Jacques Hirsch. Dad told stories of his family's success after emigration—his grandparents' brownstone on the Upper East Side, his grandfather's shoe store on Fifth Avenue. "A block long," my father would say, the space between his gesturing hands growing wider and wider. For me, a child given to fantasy and fairy tales, looking at my father's hands with his long fingers, that shoe store grew to magical proportions, and the brownstone became a castle. Our family stories began here, in America. Europe with its hardships, its restrictions against Jews was a place all of my family wanted to leave behind.

I was over fifty walking through the Old City in Jerusalem when I learned there was more to Jewish history than hardship and *shetel*, village, life. I came across a roped area where stone paving was cut away, then covered with Plexiglas. A dig. I looked down seeing pillars, foundations, grain stones: history. My history. The ancient Hebrews had built those columns. Solomon's temple was more than myth.

Still standing at my studio window, I watched that lone fisherman reel in his line. Leaving his island, he hopped from rock to rock. Then, in one final leap, he stepped onto shore.

*

Before arriving in Auvillar, I spent four days in Paris, and on one of those days, I visited a young painter's studio in *La Ruche*. Gustave Eiffel had designed *La Ruche* for the Great Exposition of 1900 as a wine routunda. Later, the buildings, called the beehive,

became studios and living quarters for artists such as Marc Chagall, Fernand Léger, Max Jacob and Diego Rivera. After years of falling into disrepair and threats of demolition, *La Ruche* was rebuilt. Now, it was once again a place for working artists, many who lived and worked in their studios.

The sun was dropping and casting shadows when I stepped down into a room crowded with canvases. One narrow window gave wan light. I stood for a moment looking into chaos. Tubes of paint covered nearly every surface, some closed, most open and spilling color. Clothing was strewn on an unmade bed and on a chair. Dirty dishes and empty tubes of paint filled a miniscule sink. I felt as if I was intruding. I turned to leave. Then, I noticed a large black and white painting propped on an easel, and suddenly, I saw nothing else in that room. This artist had painted a Concentration camp victim, emaciated and skeletal. Brush strokes stretched the figure's arms and bound his legs so that he mirrored Jesus on the cross.

I was not alone in this studio. I was with friends who had busied themselves with other images or who had entered, glanced, then, left. I stood, the soles of my feet rooted by the horrifying beauty of this artist's vision. Now, I made out the artist, a young man standing apart. He gave me a sidelong glance; then, he ran his fingers through his disheveled hair. I walked toward him. "It's beautiful, but so sad," I said. "What drew you to this subject?"

In his broken and accented English, he said, "Because we do not know. In school, no one tells us."

This artist was, perhaps, in his early thirties. So even in the nineties when he was a student, schools in France were not teaching the *Shoah*—or let me say, his school was not teaching the *Shoah*. This was France’s deep silence, its deep shame.

“I try to give away,” the young artist said. “No one wants.”

I understood. I didn’t want it, either. Who could live with that image? Yet, I did live with—if not that image, other images of that time, skeletal bodies piled like sticks, mounds of shoes and eyeglasses. But this young artist was asking a different question. “Where,” he seemed to be saying, “were you, you callous watchers of suffering, when this was happening?”

And where are we now?

*

Back in Auvillar, I moved from my window to a wooden chaise. The chaise sat low on the floor, so low it was more like a plank with a cushion than a chaise. I adjusted a pillow, high, then low on my back, trying to settle. I leaned back and closed my eyes. I’d brought that young artist’s vision back to my studio. I saw the victim’s suffering; I felt the artist’s empathy. If only, I still smoked. How soothing a cigarette would feel, that deep draw into my lungs, a slow exhale. I climbed out of my chaise.

At my computer, I Googled Jean Hirsch. Nothing I wanted. New search: Jean Raphael Hirsch, France. There he was, a dapper looking older gentleman wearing a gray suit, white shirt and red silk tie. Sitting legs crossed at his knees, he reminded me of Harry Tapper, my step-grandfather. This was the site of the AJPN, Anonymous, Righteous and Persecuted People during the Nazi period in the French communes (villages and towns). I’d been on this site before. The AJPN was a non profit organization

that collected testimonies and added them to an open online database. I wanted to see a resemblance to my father or to me—that Hirsch connection. Clean shaven, Jean Hirsch wore his silver hair as my step-grandfather Harry used to wear his, neatly parted on the side and combed over. Everything about him resembled Harry Tapper, his precise dress, his formality, the shape of his face. He looked nothing like my dad. Or me.

Jean Hirsch’s testimony was dated April 27, 2006. It began: “*Je m’appelle Jean Hirsch...* “My name is Jean Hirsch, and under the name of Jean Paul Pelous, I was a liaison officer in the French Resistance from late 1942 to August 1944. A particular fact about this liaison officer: I was only ten years old in 1943. This is my story. I had arrived in the region fleeing Paris...”

I sat back. I didn’t understand. “... arrived in the region fleeing Paris.” I’d conjured a story of Sigismond Hirsch, a country doctor, raising his family, here, in Auvillar. So *la famille* Hirsch came from away, as people in Holderness, the rural New Hampshire town, where I used to live said. And if you came from *away*, you didn’t belong—would never belong. Yet, Monsieur D. had known the family’s name, as had others, Madame F. in the town hall. I read on. In Paris, each member of the family had worn the yellow badge. Interesting translation, “yellow badge,” not star. But that’s what the badge was, a cloth Star of David with the word *Jude*, Jew written in the center.

The family escaped just days before the massive roundup of Jews in July 1942, an infamous moment in France’s history, a completely French operation, gendarmes and police arresting men, women and children, herding them into waiting buses, holding them for five days inside the *Vel d’Hiv*, a winter cycling track and stadium without water, food or toilets. Temperatures rose to unbearable heights. After those five days, these poor

people were taken to Drancy, a processing camp on the outskirts of Paris, then shipped East to Auschwitz and death.

Had the family been warned? Sigismund Hirsch was one of the founders of the Jewish Scouts, *Eclaires Israelites de France*, a normal scouting organization with a Zionist bent before the War, a Resistance organization dedicated to saving Jewish children during the War. The Scouts forged travel documents, established safe houses and later, they fought in combat units. In his testimony Jean Hirsch spoke of crossing “the demarcation line, illegally of course, inside the engine of a locomotive. At Vierzon station, where the Unoccupied Zone began, the Germans came to inspect the locomotive. Hidden at the driver’s foot, Jean Hirsch writes, “I saw these men’s boots coming and going. We had paid the smuggling railroaders 500,000 francs at the time.”

The Hirsch family settled in Auvillar. Jean Hirsch became a courier, delivering false documents. So this was why he called himself a liaison officer. He was ten years old, pedaling his bicycle from Auvillar to Moissac, probably, to the secret house, Shatta Hirsch Simon, his aunt, and Boule, his uncle ran. A secret house that sheltered Jewish refugee boys.

In his testimony Jean Hirsch asks his readers to “(I) imagine for a moment our daily situation in a conquered country, occupied by one million German soldiers, full of collaborationists totally committed to Pétain and the Nazis. ... “

Exactly what I was trying to do. What did it feel like to be Jean Hirsch? What did he sense? What did he know? What did he think about on that ride? I’d ridden a bicycle along Jean Hirsch’s likely route, a long path that bordered the canal. There were few exits.

Hirsch spoke of factors that helped Jews survive. One was the landscape. Because France was once an inland sea, the soil was finely textured. A farmer could dig down four feet. The ph was about seven, providing a ready availability of nutrients. Fruit abounded, apples, peaches, pears, kiwis, cherries and figs, and those fruits were still plentiful. On my daily walk, I picked figs, gripping a soft ripe globe with my fingertips. I bit into a sweet warm fruit. So many figs the farmers could not eat them all, so as I walked, I helped myself. But, furtively.

Vegetables, too, abounded, tomatoes, cucumbers, squash and beans growing in fields and in kitchen gardens. During the years of Occupation, many French farmers had been shipped to labor camps in Germany. I imagined a farmer's wife alone in a farm house with her children. She washed, ironed, sewed and mended clothes. She cleaned cooked, tended her children, tended the old and the sick. Outside her farm house window, she watched her fields. Who would plow? Who would harvest?

A knock on her door. Dr. Sigismond Hirsch. Perhaps, he had treated her toddler, brought medicine, cured a cough or set a broken arm. He did not ask for money. Today, a boy who was maybe sixteen or eighteen, stood beside him. The boy had a strange hunted look. The farmer's wife understood the boy had been traveling. Still, he seemed strong. Ignoring her shivers of fear, she whispered to the doctor, "*Entre.*"

This boy would work her fields.

"Regarding the gendarmes," Jean Hirsch testified, "my father squarely met them and explained what he did, pointing out that Germany was likely to lose the war, and if even one of our hidden people was arrested, the Resistance would take care of him when the war was over—or possibly before."

So the good doctor threatened reprisal. I was sure he was bluffing. At that time, Germany was mostly victorious on the battlefields. The Luftwaffe bombed, heavily. No one knew how this War would end. On October 13, 1943, Sigismond Hirsch's luck ran out. At five in the morning, a front wheel drive car and a gazifier truck full of armed Gestapo pulled up to the Hirsch residence.

A Vichy Captain in the Army's Geographical Service had turned them in. On the morning of their arrest, all warning systems failed, especially, Jean Hirsch testified, "our watch dog, Dick, tied in front of our house, had chewed his rope and run away.... I had slept in a nearby village because I had to attend an early piano lesson with a priest. Just as I was going back home, one of our guys (Resistance) stopped me and told me that my father had ordered me to hide out. So I found refuge in a nearby convent run by nuns who took care of Down Syndrome people and epileptics."

The Ursuline convent in the hills.

"Thankfully, they (the Germans) were disgusted by the sight of the crazed epileptics who urinated everywhere and by the Down Syndrome people who stuck out their tongues. The Germans hurried away, religiously, walked to the door by the nuns."

I reminded myself this was testimony gathered more than fifty years after the event. Jean Hirsch, the boy, stayed in the convent for two days. Then, a person he described as *un des notres*, one of ours, a member of the Resistance, took him to Cahors, a regional capital. There, the boy hid in an old empty hotel for eight days until another member of the Resistance brought him to Aix en Provence. In Aix en Provence, Dr. Jean Daniel, a physician and member of the Resistance took him in. Jean Hirsch went back to his old job as a liaison officer, riding his bicycle and carrying messages.

I pushed my chair back from my desk. Behind my studio, there were two other studios where writers wrote, each of us working inside our separate cocoons of solitude. On the floor below, painters painted. I wrote best in places like this, mysterious, quiet and somewhat unfamiliar. I thought of the blue drape in Mama's living room, and the comfort I felt hiding inside. I thought of Jean Hirsch living with Dr. Daniel. What did he know of his sister? His mother? His father? Why wasn't his sister arrested? Had she been away from home, too? That part of the story is missing.

I tried to approach Jean Hirsch through email. Once, we spoke on the phone and arranged a meeting in Paris. He cancelled, then rebuffed any further communication. The blank spaces in his story would remain blank—at least for me.

In his testimony, Jean Hirsch skipped time. He spoke of the summer of '44 when the Americans landed on Provence's beaches. Dr. Daniel, his family and Jean, all members of the *Maquis*, guerilla bands of the French Resistance, took to the hills. They lived in an old ruined farmhouse. Jean Hirsch described what he saw: "... hills ... full of brooms which exhaled a wonderful smell with their yellow flowers."

Brooms? Hills of brooms. Ah, broom plants.

"In the plain, American tanks were fighting German tanks. Shells set fire to the brush. From our hovel we watched as flames rose up. Someone gave an order to light a backfire. It was summer, and we were surrounded by heat. But nearby crystalline fresh water ran in a stream. Dr. Daniel set up his headquarters at the stream. There, I helped him care for the wounded. I made them drink—except those injured in the abdomen. I applied bandages. They (the wounded) were more and more numerous. So after having been a liaison officer, I was a caregiver on the battlefield.

“Just imagine the thrill of life, the relief, the sun, the U S military passing full speed with their jeeps, Dodges and self-propelled guns. These white, black soldiers who threw us chewing gum, canned meat, coffee and candies of all colors with amazing flavors. And the women, so attractive, smiled at them.”

If only his testimony ended there. It didn't. For eighteen months, Jean Hirsch was, “*seul avec lui-meme*,” alone with himself. No one told him about his parents, nor did he ask. He had no money. When winter came, his feet froze inside his wooden soled shoes. I wondered why he hadn't stayed with Dr. Daniel. Why he had he set out on his own. Evidently, he had a mission. He was crossing France, moving east to west, going back to Auvillar. He traversed what he described as “a thousand rivers with a thousand ferries because all the bridges in France seemed to have been blown up.” Someone (no name) took him to an orphanage in Moissac.

Perhaps, the secret house run by Shatta and Boule Simon. No, that wasn't possible. That house had closed in 1943, when a German presence in the south became ubiquitous. All of the safe houses closed. The Scouts took the children to farm houses, to convents, to monasteries, to the Swiss border.

One day, I tried to find the secret house in Moissic. What I found was a brick wall with two plaques, one honoring Shatta and Boule Simon, a second honoring the people of Moissac for opening their hearts and their homes to protect Jewish children during the dark years of German Occupation. No such plaque reminded the villagers of Auvillar of their particular history. That story will come later.

Jean Hirsch spoke of his parents' fate. Sent first to Drancy, Sigismond and Berthe Hirsch were shipped to Auschwitz on transport No. 62. “My father, captain of the French

Forces of the Interior, Grand Officer of the French Legion of Honor, returned alone,” Jean Hirsch testified. “His wife, my mother, thirty-seven years old, was gassed upon her arrival.”

What did it take for a son to speak those words? What images did they conjure? Probably, Jean Hirsch knew what I learned later, that his father had been tortured by the Gestapo in a prison in Toulouse, that Sigismond Hirsch, a radiologist had been forced to work with Mengele.

What did that do to a life?

In a final paragraph, Jean Hirsch reflected. “... in fact I think back to that time every day without exception. I am afraid that we did not thank the good people enough, the Righteous who helped us, risking their lives, just to obey their conscience. And I will tell you why: the mere fact to mention, to think back to that time, is so painful, cruel, thinking of those we have lost, that we often avoided renewing contact with those who were our saviors. Nevertheless, I asked and obtained recognition of the Righteous Among the Nations for Dr. Jean Daniel. This is the highest distinction granted by the State of Israel.”

*

The blankness of repressed memory and of unspoken pain, that sinking down into a place where, not we, but our brains bury what we cannot not bear. I would never feel what Jean Hirsch had felt, never fathom the depth of his many losses. Sometimes, in this work—my research, my telling these stories—I wonder if I am nothing more than a voyeur. Was that what Jean Hirsch thought when he declined to speak with me?

Impossible to know. Impossible, too, to participate in the suffering of another; yet, I wanted to touch Jean Hirsch's sleeve, to give him a sign that I cared.

Jean Hirsch's story was more complex than I dreamed, more complex than the people of Auvillar may know. So hard to face those times, hard for the villagers, hard for the Jews. I thought of the young Parisian artist painting a crucified concentration camp victim. I thought of Jews in Israel, grandchildren of survivors of the camps, tattooing their grandparents' concentration camp numbers onto their forearms, then showing them off to a photographer for the *New York Times*. As if to pass on what? Take on what? Those numbers inked into the arms of a younger generation—what are they? Anger or empathy? Bitterness or compassion? Why did those young Israelis pierce and stain their skin? Perhaps, each of us had our own way of looking into history's mirror and bearing witness. Was this what I was asking of the villagers of Auvillar, of Monsieur D., of Madame F., of myself, to bear witness? I believe the answer to that question is yes.

*

I left my studio and climbed the steep hill into the village. Houses lining this passageway mostly dated from the Middle Ages. Many had been repaired. One, although inhabited, leaned. One whole side broke and crumbled as if the house could no longer bear its weight. The house had lost part of a wall. I peered into a yard at a garden, a wooden shed, a coiled hose. Somewhere near here, a family had sheltered Jean's sister.

Across the road a repaired house with a beautiful garden and pink climbing roses. A retired English couple lived here. Now, a wall covered with rosemary. High on the hill, the road gave way to deep pot holes. Cars no longer drove here. I trudged on, rounded a curve, then stepped into the market square. At *le Baladin*, men and women sat at outdoor

tables sipping coffee. Children spooned up ice cream. Often, I stopped, here, ordered an espresso, sat and read or sat and dreamed. Today, I passed by. At *numéro trois*, the windows were not flung open. They were shuttered and in shadow. No view into the garden. No climbing roses or climbing vines.

Before my walking tour with Monsieur D., I'd known only the vicinity of the Hirsch house. Madame F. had pointed to a row of houses, and I'd selected the one next door to *numéro trois* as the house of *la famille* Hirsch, a vacant building with loose bricks and doors and shutters that needed paint. A balcony on the second floor overlooking the square had attracted my attention. There were large rectangular windows, but no door onto the balcony. I imagined Jean Hirsch, climbing out.

The Hirsch family arrived in Auvillar in July of 1942. For fifteen months, Sigismond Hirsch worked with the Resistance, finding safe houses for four hundred Jewish children. How many villagers knew of Hirsch's work? All of my life, I have lived in small towns. Secrets escaped. Word traveled.

As for *numéro trois*, Sigismond Hirsch had owned that house, but not during the War. Afterwards. Grateful to the village for saving his children, he bought up houses intending to start a Jewish community here. He used reparation money from the German government. Villagers were resentful. Why should only he get money? Hadn't they suffered, too? Relations soured.

Two years after my first visit to Auvillar, I learned *la famille Hirsch* had lived in Saint-Michel, a hamlet five kilometers south. There, Sigismond Hirsch led small meetings of the Resistance. There, he and Berthe were arrested. But on that day I stood in the square looking up at that uninhabited house with its long windows, searching like eyes,

I believed the Hirsch family had lived there, believed, too, Berthe had walked to the boulangerie to buy a *baguette*, then the *tabac* for a newspaper. I imagined Jean and his sister, carrying satchels and walking under the clock tower toward their school.

I didn't believe in ghosts, but I did believe a place had a certain feel, something that let you sense its past. Jean Hirsch might not have lived here, but I'm sure he passed through here. Saint-Michel was part of the township of Auvillar. And he returned here. Sitting on the market's low stone wall, I thought of Jean Hirsch, a young adolescent, wandering alone after the War, knowing but not knowing his parents' fates, hoping, yet most likely afraid to hope. He'd seen so much. Too much. And what would he think later?

In the winter of 1945, Sigismond Hirsch was transferred to Mauthausen, then Melk, a sub camp of Mauthausen, mostly for forced labor, then to Ebensee, another sub camp, known for its sadistic commanders and extremely cruel conditions. Prisoners dug tunnels from four- thirty in the morning until six a night. They had little food, and when their wooden clogs wore out, they worked barefoot. Jews made up one third of the inmates. The rest were political prisoners, Russians, Poles, gypsies. Jews, though, were treated more harshly than the rest. Two tanks from a squadron of the American Third Army liberated Ebensee on May 5, 1945. Sigismond Hirsch was among those freed.

Now, I looked at the closed windows of *numéro trois*. I longed to fling them open. I wanted to look into the garden. Whether they had lived there or not, I saw them sitting among climbing roses. I had images. Pictures I'd see on the internet: Sigismond Hirsch, a man with a broad forehead, narrow chin and intense eyes; Berthe, a woman with smooth skin, full lips and dark pooling eyes; Jean, seven, still a school boy in Paris, a boy who

carried his mother's soft lips. In that photo, he will always be seven, a child who had not yet hidden inside the engine of a locomotive and looked down at black leather boots.

Meandering down the hill toward my studio, I helped myself to a ripe fig. They were everywhere—if you knew where to look. Fig leaves were large and broad, and figs hid under them. I'd practiced. I'd trained my eyes. My fig was purple. It could have just as easily been green. Both varieties grew in abundance. Biting, I exposed a burnished pink center filled with a myriad of tiny seeds. A pair of chickens crossed my path, then disappeared into under brush. I listened to their sounds. Licking my fingers, I walked on.

Published (slightly different version) Stone Voices, Issue No. 10, Winter 2013

New Pages Review by Travis Laurence Naught—"Sandell Morse's "Hidden Messages" is an intricate look at one boy's survival through the Holocaust in a town that still balks at dealing with the topic. Morse was especially invested in telling this particular story accurately because the young boy and she both have the same family name: Hirsch. A good portion of the writing was done about her visit to Auvillar, France, the town where the boy lived. I was struck by her presentation of the deep history against Jewish people in that area and struck even harder by the ways she was turned away from asking too many questions by so many people on her visit. She was eventually able to find many of the answers she set out in search of in a letter that she had translated and puts it in print for anyone who picks up this issue. It is a compelling read filled with historical fact...."