



LUCIAN PERKINS

A hub of rescue work during World War II, the single Protestant church in Le Chambon is inscribed with this command: *Aimez-vous les uns les autres*—Love one another.

# PRECIPICES

During World War II, villagers in a French farming community rescued thousands of Jews and other refugees, while most Europeans spectacularly failed to hinder the genocides in their midst. What set the villagers apart?

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**I**VE BEEN SPENDING TIME IN TWO PLACES that were, in the last century, tested with awesome violence. One, a great ravine found now within the city limits of Kiev, Ukraine, was the site of one of the most deadly massacres of the Holocaust. There, on September 29 and 30, 1941, German occupation forces assisted by Ukrainian auxiliary police rounded up almost 34,000 Jews and shot them to death. The ravine into which their bodies tumbled was called Babi Yar.

The other place, the Plateau Vivarais-Lignon, in south-central France, is up high and hard to get to. Living in relative isolation, its people have evolved their own folkways over the centuries. The actions of these villagers were almost unparalleled in the history of the Holocaust: Many of the region's 24,000 residents helped rescue about 5,000 people, some 3,500 of them Jews and most of them children, from near-certain death during World War II.

Tangles of trees and harsh winds are part of both places' stories. The roads through the woods of each led, in the darkest moments of the last century, to two spectacular precipices. In those moments, with their insistent swirls of killing in the name of nation or race or

religion or class, there were still various roads to choose from. What road takes you to one precipice, or the other? Given the limits of choice and of will, how does one find the right way?

Kiev—still struggling to come to terms with its bone-filled muds—can't be compared analytically to the Plateau Vivarais-Lignon in any responsible way. The places are so unlike, their histories so distinct, the nature of the surrounding violence of entirely different magnitudes. But in both locations, more-or-less regular people faced tremendous pressure to preserve their own well-being to the detriment of targeted neighbors and strangers. Their responses were vastly different. In considering the two side by side, I aim not to curse nor to praise any given people (who endured moral tests the likes of which most of us will never have to face), but rather to meditate on these questions: How do small actions of groups, in the aggregate, make huge differences? How can social habits—the things we learn from childhood and pass on to our children—teach us immunity to the winds that whip around us, terrify us, tell us that we must think of ourselves first?



**B**Y THE END OF THE WAR, some 100,000 people had perished in the mile-and-a-half complex of branching gorges that make up Babi Yar; most of those people were probably Jews, but all, one way or another, were from reviled groups—Roma, Soviet prisoners of war, political dissidents, and Ukrainian nationalists. After September 19, 1941, when they captured Kiev, German commanders quickly determined that Babi Yar would be a suitable dumping ground for thousands of corpses. Of those gorges into which the bulk of the bodies were tossed, most have since been filled in, though some deep gashes remain. The bottom is so far down, you wonder if there isn't a lower place to be found on earth.

It is a startling fact that life went on mostly as usual in Kiev after the massacre. It is also startling that the city doesn't pay this massacre much mind today. Its history is hidden, as if in plain sight. If a visitor wants, she can arm herself with maps printed from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's Web site, purchase a metro token, and take



**A ravine where 100,000 people were murdered, Babi Yar was later used as a dump and is now scattered with bronze commemoratives. Here, a photographer visiting the site fashioned a memorial of his own.**

TED SEYMOUR

a train to the spot where on September 29, 1941, the Jews of Kiev were ordered to gather, and from there, were marched toward Babi Yar.

For decades, armies moving back and forth across the continent had pounded through Kiev—notably during World War I and the Russian civil war. It was also caught up in the famine of 1932–33, in which millions starved to death. The Germans had occupied Kiev during



World War I, and some residents of the city, in the grim calculus of allegiances in wartime, welcomed them now. By late September 1941, the German invasion of the Soviet Union was only three months under way, and rumors about what was happening to Jews in particular hadn't yet swelled to meet the true, horrible dimensions of what would become known as the Holocaust. So when signs on rough blue paper were posted throughout the city ordering "All yids of the city of Kiev" to assemble, Jews mostly assembled. They would be gathering not far from a rail line, so many thought they would be deported somewhere. Given what they and their neighbors knew and didn't know, it wasn't outrageous to think this way, even if in some parts of the city they'd already witnessed vile crimes at the hands of the German occupiers: An old woman was told to kneel on the street and was shot and killed; two guard dogs ripped a man in half. And there had been more ad hoc shootings, more chaos.

**Khava put on her faux yellow fur and softest scarf and told her neighbors she had dressed up "for the enemies."**

Fragments of the stories of those who perished remain in the memories of survivors and rescuers\*: Ania, who sewed for a living and was very poor, had two dresses, one red and one yellow. She decided to wear the nicer dress under the older, frayed one, so that she could have something to trade for food and whatever else might be needed—travel permits, bribes—during her coming journey. Khava, who was, according to her friend Vera, "simple and hard working," put on her faux yellow fur and softest scarf and told her neighbors she had dressed up "for the enemies." Lalia's mother begged her daughter—a Russian married to a Jew—to stay behind. "Would you stay behind if your husband was going?" Lalia asked her mother. "No? I won't, either." Ania, Khava, and Lalia were among the 34,000 who fell into Babi Yar.

Today, when you take the metro to Lukianivska Station, you emerge from the underground to a normal street scene of modern Kiev. There are kiosks where meat dumplings are sold, shops and banks, a McDonald's, dogs sniffing around, political posters of a braided girl proclaiming "New Power to Ukraine!" and cars angling through the traffic. With your map in hand, you can start the walk down Melnikov Street, on a cold December day, on the uneven ice of the

sidewalks. There are houses, ornate and painted green, that stood there in 1941, and others that would have come much later. You pass one apartment building, gray and crumbling with broken balconies twisting up its flanks, and you see, in faded red paint, the word *СЛАВА* (glory), distantly calling to some brilliant Soviet future. You walk on bustling streets where thousands once walked in their specially chosen clothing, beside horse-drawn carts carrying the young and the frail.

At a certain point you cross a street, and the line of cheerful storefronts ends and the pedestrians thin. You start seeing boarded-up buildings, decaying brick and wood and corroded metal. You are nearly hit by a car speeding through an intersection. There are broken, rotting vehicles littering the yards. You keep walking, and feel suddenly that you are walking down, down, and further down. There is a graveyard on the left, and a great television tower in the distance, coming out of the ground like an *umbilicus mundi*.

**T**HERE ARE SO FEW SURVIVORS OF that walk to Babi Yar, and the story was so wretched for both bystanders and survivors to tell, that for decades, little was said or written about it. In his

2004 book *Harvest of Despair* and in his ongoing research (from which I've drawn in writing this essay), historian Karel Berkhoff has painstakingly traced the steps of those 34,000 men and women during September 1941: where they stopped and waited; where they turned to walk between two graveyards; the spot where friends said goodbye forever; the places where they were beaten; the places where they gave their papers to the German soldiers; the places where they were stripped by Ukrainian police and then waited, nearly naked; the places where they were lined up and shot; the places that were thick with trees and those that were open and bare.

Memories of witnesses, however imperfect after the years, help us navigate through the events. Vera stole away at night with another girl because they wanted to know what had happened to their Jewish friends. Crouching in the shadows, holding her friend's hand, Vera saw men drinking and laughing, sitting at a table that had been set up by the edge of the ravine. "We see," she remembers, "in front of us, a line of figures in their underwear. White figures." And then, she heard "*ta-ta-ta-ta-ta*," and the figures fell. Another line of white emerged and—"ta-ta-ta-ta-ta"—that line fell, too.

Everyone seems to remember the blue placard that called them to assemble. Everyone remembers the crowds. One woman remembers a young girl of “wondrous beauty,” together with her brother or husband, walking with the others on the way to their deaths. An old man was tossed by his beard over a fence; the beard remained in the hand of the soldier who threw him. A “glamour girl” named Sarah was taken into the woods by a group of soldiers, alone.

Did this tragedy happen because people in Ukraine hated Jews vividly and actively—so much that they were willing to witness, to stand by, and in some cases to aid in this unspeakable crime? The question itself is epistemologically knotty, but what can be said is this: A particular kind of animus toward Jews had long existed in Ukraine, with its history of pogroms that had flared from time to time in its cities and countryside, and of periodic rages among elites who blamed Jews for the political troubles of the day. This animus was like a well-worn garment that could be donned when convenient and politically expedient. But it was not all there was.

There were also friendships, marriages, and other unions that knitted Jews to their neighbors; fellow feeling and in-

stances of sacrifice are woven throughout stories of survivors. In feats of individual heroism, thousands in Ukraine rescued Jews during World War II. Yad Vashem, the Holocaust museum and research center in Jerusalem, has honored 2,402 people from Ukraine as “righteous among the nations.” Here, in Kiev, was a murderous invasion of outsiders, and regular people now needed to decide what to do as they peered out windows to watch their neighbors walk down Melnikov Street. Clearly, neither individual acts of heroism—as significant as they were—nor individual attachments were enough to protect the people of Kiev from the calamity unfolding in their midst. People were bound by ties of marriage or friendship, but not enough in the aggregate.

On March 13, 1961, there was a mudslide in Kiev. For years, a brick factory had been dumping its waste into the ravine at Babi Yar, which still held the remnants of blood and bone from the 1941 catastrophe. At one point there were heavy rains; the dam holding the waste burst, and that awful soil overflowed. Mud flooded the streets below, oozing into houses and industrial buildings, engulfing automobiles, knocking over streetcars, and killing, according to estimates, 1,500 to 2,000



people. As the ground flooded, some residents remembered the killing fields, finally, out loud. “Babi Yar revenge,” they said.

Not long ago, on a silver-gray December day, I found myself in what is now the expansive public park called Babi Yar. There were rows of leafless trees along an *allée*, pathways that led to forest, others to open spaces. Women walked by with prams. Evidently, the park had been used for carousing: Refuse was everywhere. Here and there stood official memorials, garish and unsolemn, for those killed at Babi Yar—“To the children,” “To the citizens of Kiev.” One, a monument to Soviet citizens and POWs, had cast in bronze horror-images of people falling and dying. There were also makeshift shrines: a cross with a plastic bouquet of roses, an unadorned wooden cross. A crow flew by. For decades, Soviet authorities suppressed mention of the particular crimes against Jews; the main memorial that does focus on Jewish victims—a large metal menorah constructed by Jewish groups in 1991—was littered with frozen sputum. As I stood near the menorah, the silence of the place was shattered by cacophonous barking: A group of dogs encircled another dog, and attacked it.

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Many of the ravine’s draws have been covered over in the years since 1941. First, dirt was tossed over the corpses, which were excavated and burned. Then the ground was leveled. I wandered for a time in the park among the prams, through the garbage-strewn paths and then some woods, and finally found a true precipice. The earth was carved to an edge. The trees rooted below came up to meet me, and the mournful ash-colored trunks with their black branches looked like skeleton fingers reaching toward the smoky heavens. Standing at the edge, I thought: No monument could be as true as the act of looking down, and then up.

On my way out of the park, I saw an assembly of shiny black crows walking over a floor of rotting leaves, looking, perhaps, for grubs. With sharp beaks, they delicately, soundlessly picked up matted piles of leaves, turned them over, and slowly placed them down again.

ON THE PLATEAU VIVARAIS-LIGNON, the climate is mean: In winter, snows and snaking winds humble the approaching stranger. Once you settle into the farmlands of the plateau, it feels like a cradle, but if you travel around its roughly 30-mile perimeter, you meet with dizzying drops toward a river. And yet, during World War II, thousands of refugees made the climb up here.

Some came from the Warsaw ghetto. Others came from Paris, the petted children of artists or merchants. Some had seen family shops and community temples shattered during the orchestrated pogroms that took place all over Germany and Austria on the Night of Broken Glass in November 1938—hearing screams of “*Saujude!*” (Jew pig!). Some had seen their mothers beaten by soldiers, had seen their mothers’ teeth knocked out. Still others had already been to concentration camps and been clubbed by guards or had watched older, more powerful prisoners kick over their bowls of food around a shared outdoor fire. After the mad exodus south following the German invasion of France in 1940, many had already witnessed the quick hierarchies of hiding and captivity established among those who spoke Yiddish, or French, or German, enjoying the attendant advantages of

making community through trust and trade; those from rich families, or not; those who knew how to break rules and those who held onto them; those who had traded all their jewelry for a train ticket; those who had lost the loves of their lives. They’d hidden in church attics and among the roots of trees in the woods. They’d seen cattle felled by machine-gun fire, and some had seen, for the first time, dead human bodies. Most had had a brush with the end—before some soldier let them pass by, some attic was offered, some lost mother or brother was miraculously found.

One after the other, the refugees found their way to the plateau. Word had spread. There was a set of villages where people were taking in Jews: Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, Le Mazet-Saint-Voy, Tence, Saint-Agrève, Fay-sur-Lignon, Montbusat, and other places—towns, hamlets, even lone homesteads. They’d heard there would be schools for children, farmhouses with room for hiding, ways to obtain false documents and secure passage to Switzerland and safety.

Before German troops moved into the unoccupied portion of collaborationist Vichy France in late 1942, it was still possible for humanitarian and religious groups to gather children from concentration camps in the south and to find





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**Children pose for a group portrait outside Le Chambon in the early 1940s. On the plateau, Jewish children sprung from Vichy internment camps would attend Christian church services in order to hide their identities, but were encouraged to worship in secret as they chose.**

places where they might be safer, away from their parents. The plateau became one of the well-known destinations for those children, but also for many other people who had simply found their way by rumor: *Here, they'll take you in.*

Up their trains climbed onto the plateau. And what were they met by? Rock cliffs wet with moss, pine trees, odd jutting volcanic hills, green farmland. Wind, whipping through the forest and over the fields, pounding against stone houses with walls three feet thick. And in winter lay snows so immense that some saw the stuff as if for the first time in their lives.

In the villages of the plateau were narrow streets, more stone buildings, small town squares where locals rinsed their laundry in the public fountain, and stores where old men would gab away the day. In Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, the trains would stop and residents would meet the refugee families and find homes for them. From there, streets wound down to the Lignon River, and up toward forests and waterfalls. And on the way to the river, the single Protestant church met the refugees, too, its stone walls bare except for an incised command: *Aimez-vous les uns les autres.* Love one another.

Among those greeting the refugees were dairy farmers with startling blue eyes, and refugee children, already arrived, who now came to the train station to bring the newcomers to farms by sleigh. There were the volunteers who'd arrived from other parts of France and even other countries to help in this rescue—some for religious reasons and others because they saw in this work a chance to help with what one young volunteer, Daniel Trocmé, called the “reconstruction of the world.” Once they arrived, these refugees were given what was, to survivors, a never-forgotten kindness: They came to the door of a stranger, and the door was opened.

**Nearly everyone on the plateau was involved in the rescue effort—not only its Protestant majority, but also Catholics, Jews, and nonreligious humanitarians—and their participation carried risks.**

Once there, refugees found work; many joined the rescue effort, teaching

in schools, caring for the weak, procuring false documents. To various degrees, they joined the community. In the late 19th century, the plateau had become a tourist destination for those seeking respite from the noxious air of large French cities. Because of this, housing and supporting infrastructure existed that could now be transformed into makeshift family homes and schools for the flood of outsiders.

If the refugees were children, they went to schools and made friends. The ones without parents would weep at night or wet the bed or howl for food; in time, they would learn to play among the jumble of languages now spoken on the plateau. They would learn the contours of the farmhouses and streets and rivers and hills. For the first time in their lives, city children carried buckets of water and bales of hay.

Nearly everyone on the plateau was, one way or another, involved in this rescue effort—not only its Protestant majority, but also Catholics, Jews, and nonreligious humanitarians—and their participation carried risks. The German army knew in general terms about the rescue, and occasionally they would act. Some pastors endured extra risk; after years of travel in foreign countries, pastors André Trocmé and Edouard Theis



would boldly bring to the pulpit ideas about nonviolent resistance that they'd embraced in those travels. Other pastors would quietly plot with their parishioners the dangerous tactics and techniques of rescue. In 1944, German soldiers went on a rampage, killing farm workers and burning a house down. There was the dashing Roger Le Forestier, a physician who had come to the plateau after fighting leprosy in the Belgian Congo alongside Albert Schweitzer. Now, for his work in rescue and resistance, he was arrested, sent to the infamous Gestapo prison in Lyon, and shot and killed. In June 1943 at the Maison des Roches, a children's home, 18 young men were sent to detention camps alongside the home's director, the bespectacled Daniel Trocmé. Trocmé, who was later called "*un garçon merveilleux*, a hero, a *tsaddik*" by a survivor, had refused to leave his charges. After several months spent moving from camp to camp, from country to country, writing letters to his parents with messages to the children he'd left behind in Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, he fell ill and died in Majdanek, a camp in Poland. Five of the boys, the ones who were determined to be Jewish, were sent to the French transport camp, Drancy, and then to Auschwitz, where all were murdered.

But most days, life was as normal as could possibly be imagined in that merciless period. By the time the Germans lumbered up the hills, alarms would sound and dogs would start barking madly. The children would be told to go into the woods to look for mushrooms—sometimes with no sense of the immediate danger.

FOR YEARS, I HAVE BEEN LOOKING closely at small communities to see how they react to large, powerful, and violent states. Sometimes, remarkably, those communities resist the will of larger forces to perpetuate violence. What are, in detail, the social foundations of nonviolent communities? How do they come into existence, and how can they remain resilient and robust once they do?

Perhaps the first thing to understand about Plateau Vivarais-Lignon is that the community has been taking in strangers—persecuted, or poor or ill—for centuries. The villagers know how to do it; they possess the knowledge as a habit and a skill. Since the 16th century, the plateau has been home to a great number of Protestants. Up in hard-to-reach hills and far from the center of French rule, the Protestants on the plateau sheltered their coreligionists or shuttled them to

safety during the gruesome struggles of the Reformation that marked the end of Roman Catholic hegemony. Many of the present-day plateau dwellers are descendants of the Protestants who remained in the region. Studies of altruism—found in the sociology of Samuel and Pearl Oliner and Nechama Tec, for instance, and in the social psychology of Eva Fogelman—don't show that Protestants are necessarily more likely to perform altruistic acts than others. They do, however, find that one social feature that seems to encourage heroic altruism is the experience of having been an outsider, or a minority, or persecuted oneself. Altruism fares best, in other words, among those who have been treated badly and have decided that treating others well is best for all. Martin Luther King Jr. said repeatedly that turning the other cheek is a social act. Done collectively, it becomes a transformative social act.

**As Vichy authorities questioned him about the Jews living on the plateau, Pastor Trocmé said, “We don’t know what a Jew is, we only know men.”**

After the French Revolution, these same Protestant villagers of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon protected Catholic priests who fled the new regime. In the late 19th century, children from nearby industrial cities were brought to the plateau—increasingly known for its fresh, salubrious air—for healing, and a home was opened that welcomed needy children from the south of France and refugee children from Algeria. During World War I, children arrived from the disputed territory of Alsace, and the 1930s brought more refugees, from the Spanish Civil War. During World War II, Jews came, of course, but also German soldiers who refused to fight, communists, and other political exiles. After the war, people came from Hungary, Chile, Tibet, and other countries. Today, a local branch of France's Centre d'accueil pour demandeurs d'asile (Reception Center for Asylum Seekers) hosts families from Congo, Rwanda, Angola, Kosovo, Serbia, Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Dagestan, and Chechnya.

When you arrive at a door on the plateau, the people opening it don't ask what kind of person you are. As Vichy authorities questioned him about the Jews living on the plateau, Pastor Trocmé said, “We don't know what a Jew is,





People from around the world find refuge on the plateau, which remains largely a rural farming community.

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we only know men.” So in the summer of 1941, it didn’t matter that Elizabeth, who’d traveled an odyssey from Vienna, was Jewish. It didn’t matter that Peter, who was from Berlin and was to lose both parents to Auschwitz, was Jewish either. Or that Pauline would walk into the forest with other Jews of the plateau, to celebrate Sukkot in secret. Years later, Simon, who’d come from Paris to live in a farmhouse, would say, “For me, Le Chambon was the town that made me happy, that gave birth to me . . . intellectually and religiously. Bizarrely, I became Jewish there in the sense of seeing

and researching Judaism.” But no one asked Simon about his Jewishness, and no one asked Hans, who arrived already religious. Still a teenager when interned at the French concentration camp, Rivesaltes, he had volunteered to carry the dead to the morgue, to ensure that part of the solemn Jewish burial rites would be performed for them.

Hans was Jewish, but he could have been any refugee when he arrived on the plateau with a small group of other boys and started

attending school. He was a resident of the Maison des Roches, where he lived with a couple dozen charges from places such as Poland, Germany, Holland, Spain, Belgium, Lithuania, and Persia. His parents would be sent away on a transport to Auschwitz from Drancy, and he would never see them again. But years later, Hans spoke of how he still believed in God and miracles, and the necessity of love for mankind, and the way people lived the dictum of “love one another” on the plateau. He and his wife still performed their own ritual each night: “Before we go to sleep,

we hold hands and we kiss goodnight and we say, ‘Never again.’” This is where, telling his story, Hans finally wept.

His rescuers quietly brought some measure of normality to an awful situation. What does normal look like on the plateau? It looks like hard work and well-ordered days of family life. It looks like up-close interactions with fields, trees, and skies. I notice a kind of affable detachment, an uprightness, a clear-eyed kindness. I notice a love of routine and schedule and long midday meals. They are friends, in deed, when ice freezes the pipes and cars break down.

Is this what the groups who open doors always look like? Are they always in faraway villages where modest people speak a homely patois? History and geography have shown that if these villagers have been stubbornly peaceful, others have made pogroms. It’s not the village or the mountain, or even the simple ways that seem to matter most. It’s the fact that this set of villagers learned, over time and as a group, to make this principle routine: To show kindness to a stranger, to offer her your cloak, to return his blows with affection, even in the direst circumstances. They learned to make actual what Jews on the plateau would have known as *tikkun olam*, repairing the world.

Against the rooted normality on the plateau, there are everyday troubles, as well as the fiercer ones that come with taking in traumatized people. But these trials are not weighed against the matter-of-fact practice of sheltering needy outsiders. As a friend told me one night by the orange light of a fire in her family hearth—she, the pale-skinned, blue-eyed granddaughter of farmers who protected Jews during the war—the important thing to do when you open a door to strangers is to have faith. Not faith in the person behind the door, she told me, but faith that all will be, somehow, as it should.

The equation there shifts away from the quick calculations of rational choice: It is a faith in something higher and unseen and absolutely just. “Love one another” is thereby a technology of moral choice. The remarkable things that happened on the plateau during the war didn’t occur because people there were angels or because they were French, but because they had cultivated an altruism that is a near banality of goodness. It is a habit that relies on tiny, everyday acts that, in the aggregate, have meant something astonishing, have led to something monumental, something that could make an old man weep with gratitude.



Here are two precipices: Babi Yar and the Plateau Vivarais-Lignon. Babi Yar—and its bones of one hundred thousand souls. The plateau—and the souls of five thousand who were preserved to have lives and fortunes of their own, with children, and children's children, and the rest. With the unfolding of time, those five thousand will surely give rise to one hundred thousand more. And these will carry the mark of the blessings and prayers of their forebears: *Love one another and Never again.* ■

*\*All quotes of survivors and witnesses were drawn from the USC Shoah Foundation Institute Visual History Archive, to which I had access while I was the Miles Lerman Center for the Study of Jewish Resistance Research Fellow at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, in Washington, D.C. All translations from Russian and French are mine.*

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