

A CELEBRATION OF FAITH AND LOVE

25th Anniversary on Provence

The celebration of our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary in 1994 became the occasion for a special trip which entwined our two heritages into a single unified strand. We had seen Pierre Sauvage's film *Weapons of the Spirit* and read Philip Hallie's *Lest Innocent Blood be Shed*,¹ both of them about the little Huguenot village of Le Chambon sur Lignon that had sheltered thousands of Jews during the Nazi Occupation of France. It had been of incalculable comfort to me to know there were some Christians in Europe in World War II who had stood firm in their faith and followed through on the consequent actions of that faith, when so much of civilized humanity caved in before the Nazi juggernaut of power. "Let's go to France, and to Le Chambon!" The trip instantly turned into a pilgrimage.

I phoned Philip Hallie in Connecticut to get more detailed information about families that might still be living in Le Chambon, and whom we could contact. We wanted to be able to thank someone face-to-face for their gift of love and preservation. Philip gave us the names of Ernest and Rose Chazot, who had been mentioned in his book.

The week of Passiontide, 1994, Don and I flew to southern France to spend two weeks in Provence before heading north to Le Chambon. We arrived in Aix-en-Provence on Maundy Thursday. Walking down the street from our hotel at dusk, we heard singing. We followed the sound into an immense, cathedral-like sanctuary where a service was going on. Apparently the choir and congregation alike knew the chants and hymns, for the singing was

strong from both quarters. There must have been a thousand people attending, all of them intentional about their worship. As is the custom everywhere, the service concluded in darkness and silence, as the sacrament was carried back through the church to the altar of repose. We received this first night's experience as a token of God's blessing on our pilgrimage.

We returned for the Good Friday service—also solemn and ending in darkness—and for the Easter Vigil (La Pâque) which began outside the church late Saturday night in the rain. A huge bonfire was lit, then the Pascal Candle, from which we lighted our own candles and went inside in procession. We will not soon forget the power of the beautiful music we heard during those evenings, and the worshipful quiet brooding over us all.



We spent most of our first two weeks in the heart of Provence at a beautiful guest home near Bonnieux. We wanted to absorb country Provençal life, to be rested and in a stable situation. The crowning glory of the house was the view—an uninterrupted one of the entire Vaucluse plain and the Luberon Mountains in the distance, even snow-capped Mont Ventoux; and on the other side Marquis de Sade's castle atop the hill on which the village of LaCoste rested. From our windows we could see the vineyards, the greening of the countryside, the approach of weather—clouds and sunlight. And we heard the whine of the "mistral"—that Siberian wind that whistles down the canyons and across the plains with such fury.



From this home base, we went forth daily to visit the quaint villages of Provence, navigating the narrow winding streets to the hilltops on which most of them are perched, dining in tiny cafés, spending quiet moments in the great churches or an abbé flanked by fields of lavender, finding Camus' gravestone, buying lunch at a village open market on fair day, sitting in parks watching the old men play "boules", climbing atop the red rocks of Roussillon to see a double rainbow, living the much slowed-down pace of the countryside.



We found Picasso's chateau on the forested slope of Mont Sainte Victoire, before circling around to the southern face where Cezanne painted the sunlit mountain rising abruptly from the stark plain. There was one moment of nostalgia in Salon de Provence, where we paused in the square to listen to jazz coming over loudspeakers from a shop nearby, feeling back home again for a moment as we listened to familiar tunes played by American jazz artists.



Don is walking toward Picasso's castle, located on the dark side of the mountain, before we drove around to the southern sunnier exposure where Cezanne painted.

On the eve of our wedding anniversary, we splurged in a full Provençale restaurant meal. Our host made reservations for us in the one restaurant he patronizes, on the outskirts of Roussillon. Aside from German house guests and the family of the chef, we were the only patrons that evening. The conversation around the table took place in three languages, with amazing success.

Of course the quality of the meal helped. The French style of eating is very leisurely. Edmond, the chef, mingled with us as we ate, eager to please us with his cuisine. It turned out that Edmond was also a jazz buff, and he and Don were able to connect by just saying names of jazz musicians. Don even succeeded in telling a truly international joke, by putting in the name of a jazz musician at just the right moment, with the appropriate connotations, so as to make everyone—all three languages—laugh!



Roussillon became the village we returned to again and again.



Roussillon derives its name from its famous "red rocks" like those in Colorado.

We visited churches in every village, and these are in Roussillon.



Nestled close to Roussillon is the more upscale village of Gordes, perched on the side of the mountain.



The town with the name of "Fontaine" lured us into a cafe where we could eat at the edge of the flowing stream.



We traveled south in Provence to the Cathedrale des Images — a tourist favorite perhaps. On the way we were struck more by the stunning golden fields under the clouded sky than anything preserved in the cave.

We always loitered around village squares—like this one with an unusual water spout.



The Sunday markets were always a surprise, with the display of so many different birds that the French find a delicacy.

We had to include a visit to Arles and to the historic Pont d'Avignon. We took the official tour in little white trains first, then navigated the same route by car so we could stop and snap pictures.



The next day after our anniversary dinner, we left the Vaucluse and headed north into the mountains toward our main destination—the village of Le Chambon. The road was shrouded not only by fog but also the dark forests on either side, as we climbed the sinewy trail of the rivers. The deciduous trees were still a wintry black, but there were an increasing number of evergreens.

I had expected Chambon to be a tiny village, a scattering of houses in the central area, and then farmhouses on the hillsides around. But we soon found that Chambon is a kind of sports center in that area, and the village is really a small city, buzzing with Protestant capitalist energy. As we drove around the village looking at the farmhouses, we wondered which ones provided protection for Jews. In the center of town, we saw the public square, where Gestapo soldiers strutted, and often looked the other way, for they did not particularly want to fulfill their duty and arrest the peace-loving folks here.

After a nap—the drive in fog and curvy mountainous terrain had been tiring—we sallied forth. We wondered how we would find Ernest and Rose Chazot. But miraculously, there was a telephone listing. We didn't dare phone, because of our poor language skills, and we had been told they were not English-speaking. So instead we found the neighborhood where they lived, and with help located the house. They were not home to respond to our knock, so I began laboriously writing a note in French to leave, when they suddenly drove up, returning from a visit to their relatives.

Ernest and Rose were an elderly couple, kindly grandparent-like folks. Many years had passed since they sheltered a Jewish family from Vienna in their home during the war. Graciously, they invited us inside, lit the fire already laid in the fireplace, and we began to speak as best we could across the language barrier. I knew enough French to convey to them that my husband was Jewish, and that he had been affected by images of the concentration camp as a young boy, and had been writing poetry to honor the memory of the Holocaust. I told them we came to thank them for what they and others in Chambon had done for Jewish refugees during the Nazi Occupation in World War II. As I spoke, Don and I both wept. Just as the book and film indicated, the Chambon folks are modest and unassuming about what they did. Rose Chazot made it very clear that what they did is what everyone should do as a Christian. "C'est normal."



Next morning, we found the present pastor of the church—the designation is Reformed. In this case the ethnic background is Huguenot, a group very familiar with religious persecution, having suffered throughout history for their faith. He explained again to us that what the folks did years ago was not extraordinary.

Reluctantly we drove out of town, heading toward Chartres and Paris. We would always remember our visit to LeChambon. It was a wonderful way to spend our wedding anniversary.

It has also been a wonderful way to spend my life—this life with Don and with God. It continues. . .



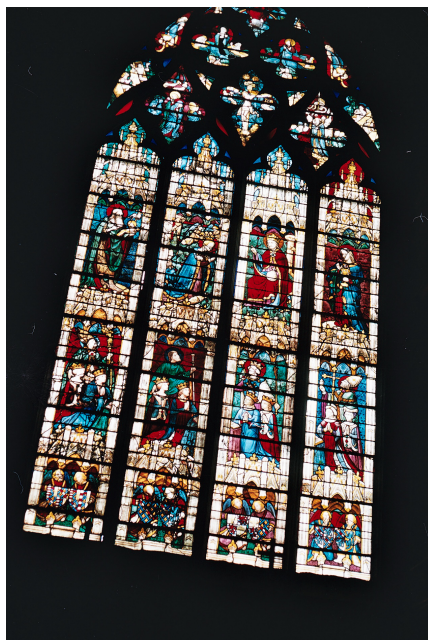


Of course, we went to Paris before flying home! And we went by way of Chartres to visit the cathedral.

Strangely, it is the unadorned steeple that is the older one!

On Saturday morning, I slipped into the cathedral at dawn, wanting a moment of stillness there.

But as I entered, I heard the soaring sweet voice of a singer echoing through the vast space; a singer practicing for a Sunday service. I shall never forget that moment.





One more stop before Paris and flying home: Claude Monet's home and gardens.

