

A Man from The Resistance

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Golden fields scarlet with poppies, cherry orchards studded with ruby fruit, isolated villas with pantiled roofs and always the backdrop of stark granite mountains - that's how I saw Provence on the last day of May. It was a warm sunny morning as we left the Cote d'Azur choked with traffic and seething with tourists. We headed into the hinterland for a rendezvous with history - destination Apt, a town of about 12,000 people and an appointment with the honorary Mayor, Monsieur Fernand Jean.

Some months before I had been shown a book written by Fernand Jean, called "J'y Etais" - "I was there". It was a book telling the story of the resistance fighters in this region of France. The author explained in the preface his reason for writing it. "I wanted the truth to be known of the bravery and of the loyalty - and sometimes the treachery of the little people in this unknown part of France." I was then attending a French class, consisting of people who were dedicated Francophiles and we decided that as a special project, we would translate this book into English. As we read it, we were captured by the stories of courage and cruelty, of bravery and tragedy. And then by chance, I had the opportunity to travel to the part of France where all these stories had taken place.

And now this was the day I was to meet the author. I had made the appointment by telephone. The voice at the other end was that of an old man, his accent clearly not the clear French of the Parisien. I wondered if I would manage to understand him when we met, whether the meeting would merit the long journey. As we approached our destination - Apt, 20 kilometres, we started to climb. The road zigzagged its way upwards. The open countryside gave way to thick woodland and then the tangled maquis, the area of rough ground which gave its name to a branch of the resistance fighters, men who had been brought up to face a tough life, making their livelihood from a difficult terrain.

We crested the mountain and below a panorama lay before us, a vast plain dotted with villages each dominated by a tall church steeple, with fields of intense cultivation, lush orchards, a scene of tranquillity and peace. And in the middle of the plain lay the town of Apt, an old town

whose ancient centre was now overtaken by progress, by new villas, apartment blocks, industrial zones and a vast military establishment. Entering the old town and crossing the river, I kept wondering whether my journey was a wasted one. This old man, would I understand him? Was he still able to communicate? Could he even remember? I needn't have worried. No sooner had I rung the bell of the small villa on the outskirts of the town, when the door opened and there stood a man who belied his eighty-three years of age. He was fresh-faced, alert, trim in a crisp blue shirt, a tie with the cross of Lorraine, the sign of the Free French, under the knot, the flash of the Order of the Legion of Honour on his lapel.

He greeted me with great courtesy and immediately showed me into his sitting room. This room told me everything about him. New files lay on the table, a tray with two glasses and a bottle of Muscat already prepared. On the wall, I saw framed photos of President de Gaulle, our Queen - an array of medals including the King's Medal from George IV and the Freedom Medal of the U.S.A., This was the home of a disciplined military man, who even at eighty three maintained order in his household, despite living alone.

We started talking. I explained how we were attempting to translate his book into English, honestly and accurately, leaving nothing out and putting nothing in. He was obviously delighted. At first, his open-vowelled Provençale French was difficult to understand but before long, I'd got the hang of it. He had published the book himself, 1500 copies, and had sold 1200, retaining 300 to give as gifts. He told me the rights were all his and I could have them for the English version – he offered the use of his illustrations and every possible help. I think he was overcome to think we would attempt such a task.

Over a glass of pastis, we talked a lot more. He'd been Mayor of Apt for thirty years, from 1946 to 1976 and at the commencement of the war, was a soldier in the elite Parachute Regiment. At the fall of France, he had been discharged and sent home to start a garage business in the then unoccupied part of France. Restrictions and rationing limited his work and his income but it was sufficient to keep himself and his wife and small son. Then as the war progressed and the Allies threatened to become strong enough to invade the Continent, the Germans gradually took over unoccupied France to safeguard the southern coasts from invasion. Life became much more difficult. It was then he made contact through a growing resistance organisation with London - his special knowledge of parachuting was invaluable. He built up an organisation in his sector,

initially to provide false papers for Frenchmen escaping forced labour in Germany. Then he organised landing sites for drops of supplies for the Maquis and resistance forces and finally for agents, women amongst them. He offered sanctuary in his own home, risking his own and his family's safety.

On one occasion, he with two colleagues prevented the Germans from acquiring secret equipment from a Wellington bomber which had crashed in flames nearby. They secreted away all the valuable parts and at the same time, buried the three airmen who had died in the blazing aircraft. The Gestapo never knew whether the crew were at large or dead. After the war he made contact with the families of these airmen and every year, he goes to the military cemetery at Marseille where they were subsequently interred and places a wreath on the anniversary of their death. There were so many stories to hear and questions to ask but my time was limited. His museum, housed in his garage, of memorabilia of the occupation, Gestapo reports, Citations and Medals merited a far longer visit than I was able to give.

His son, his grandson and now his great grandson have followed him into the Parachute Regiment, and next year, he told me proudly, he hoped that the four generations would together make a parachute leap!! He'll be eighty four then and if he goes on as he appears at this time, he'll surely make it. What a man! and what a privilege to meet one of those great resistance heroes we have perhaps forgotten or perhaps have never known.

As I left, this charming old man said "Permettez-moi?" and courteously kissed me on either cheek as he led me through his charming garden of roses and pomegranate trees to the waiting car. Au Revoir, Fernand Jean, and BONNE CHANCE!