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Book Review: The Marcel Network: How One French Couple Saved 527 Children From the Holocaust

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Fred Coleman. *The Marcel Network: How One French Couple Saved 527 Children From the Holocaust* (Washington D.C.: Potomac Books, 2013). Pp 231, Hardback, $ 27.50.

During WWII and the Holocaust, Moussa and Odette Abadi hid 527 Jewish children in France, 140 at a time, from deportation and certain death. Journalist Fred Coleman now tells their inspiring story in his publication The Marcel Network, building on the historical record and the work of other scholars. Out of such fascinating material he ultimately crafts a captivating story full of love, kindness, and tragedy that can easily supplement conversations around complicity, resistance, and postwar trauma as tied to the Holocaust and beyond.

The Marcel Network, named after Moussa's fake name during WWII, was an elaborate clandestine operation to hide Jewish children throughout the region of Nice in Vichy France. Originally occupied by Italian soldiers and thus relatively safe early on, the situation changed with the fall of Mussolini. In September 1943, German troops occupied the area and began deporting Jewish residents and refugees. Moussa and his wife Odette anticipated this shift and decided earlier that "We have to do something" to help (12). With the support of a wide network of local and regional helpers, they placed Jewish children within Catholic institutions and various families around the area, ultimately protecting them from deportation to death camps.

Coleman describes logistics and challenges of this network in great detail, without losing sight of the central role of Odette and Moussa. Both worked tirelessly to ensure the children had a new identity, the needed ration cards, and a safe place to stay each night. Moussa had an office in the bishop's residence to provide new identities and record those for postwar reunions; Odette took on a motherly role constantly visiting children placed in the area. Coleman outlines daily dangers for the two of them, including the eventual arrest of Odette and her deportation to Auschwitz. He also adds a variety of nuances. For instance, Coleman describes the challenges of "depersonalization" (48): most of the children were young when assigned new identities, and often fully embraced

them even after 1945; older children, at times, had difficulty fully endorsing their new life, a threat given German occupation, potential denouncement, and fear of detection.

Odette and Moussa, as well as 527 children, ultimately survived WWII and the Holocaust, yet the events stayed with them well after liberation. Attempts to reunite children with their parents resulted in happy endings and tragedies, developments that at least in part explain why Moussa and Odette rarely discussed their doings after WWII. Apart from a short interview in the immediate postwar period they remained largely silent, until the 1990s. Their documents and several interviews then provided the author with the needed evidence to reconstruct this inspiring story.

In the end, Coleman provides a powerful narrative, thankfully aimed at a broader audience. Built on several interviews and the work of some scholars like Annette Wieviorka, he is able to give life to Moussa and Odette, and the Marcel Network. He captures their love story as a young couple caught in the middle of WWII France and aligns it with some of the stories of the children; he also elaborates on post-liberation struggles and depressions, and the eventual choice to share the story. Along the way Coleman alludes to the role of the Italians within the region and raises questions around the responsibility of everyday citizens in France. These comments, plus those tied to the Catholic Church, need to be aligned more closely to the extensive scholarship and historiography on such dynamics, an aspect particularly noticeable when Coleman discusses several "myths" tied to collaboration, complicity, and resistance (82/83). At one point, for instance, he writes, "Often those most ready to open their homes were older, childless couples in poorer pockets of the countryside" (22). Here, more context is a must for readers, and adding such does not have to take away from the key message, as summarized by a quote from Moussa: "What is a hidden child? It is a child in danger. It is a child who needs help from others. It is a child who risks death.... Do something.... Yell, scream, don't accept that in this world children can be killed a few hundred kilometers from your home" (215).

~ Martin Kalb,
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