

Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed

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Introduction

The book “Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed” is written by Philip Hallie, a Griffin professor of philosophy at Wesleyan University. He passed away in 1994 and left the manuscript of the book behind, which was published through the devoted efforts of his wife, Doris Ann Hallie. The book details the terrible years of World War II when most of the world was engulfed by political insanity and inhumanity and when the Nazi domination over Europe seemed irreversible and unopposed. It was during such dark times that a ray of light flickered in a small Protestant town called Le Chambon, located in the South of France. The heroic contribution of that quiet and peaceful town is recorded in this book as the villagers and the clergy organized and saved countless Jews, both children and adults, from imminent death. This miraculous feat of Le Chambon’s villagers in full view of the Vichy government and the German troops brought hope not only for the author but for the readers even today.

Discovery Of The Tale

The book narrates the research preceding the discovery of the tale of Le Chambon. Philip Hallie reminisces about the days when he poured into the documents from the Holocaust, reading stories upon stories of human cruelty. He recalls it as the tales of “the slow crushing and grinding of a human being by other human beings”. He had narrowed his research to the harrowing medical experiments conducted on children by Nazis. What is important to note here is the objectivity that the author developed towards these horror-filled tales of cruelty and how these endless recurrences of torture seemed dull to him as he became so desensitized that he did not give a second thought to any incident. It was during the research through these damned stories that something unusual occurred, and Dr. Hallie came across a short description of the village of Le Chambon. The stories of the valour of these villagers under the leadership of a Protestant pastor, saving countless Jews, moved the author to tears. It was their kindness that led to a sleepless night, and the author realized that the residents of this village were now reaching old age. He recognized the urgent need for action, lest their stories would be lost forever. Motivated by their story of courage and faith, Dr Hallie was in Le Chambon, and the wonderful tale “Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed” was the result. The villagers believed in the sacredness of human life and that each individual is created in God’s image. The villagers put this belief into practice, redeeming the author and many others from the coercion of despair.

The Reality Of Goodness

The entire character of the book is established by an incident from its beginning that is set during the time of German Occupation, more precisely, its third year. On the evening of 13th February 1943, a police car arrived at the house of Reverend Andre Trocme in Le Chambon, where he lived with his wife, Magda Trocme. Since the pastor was not at home, his wife hid the refugees and answered the door. The police enquired her about her husband's whereabouts, to which she replied that she didn't know. She explained that he had gone to visit the members of the parishioners and might return soon. She invited the police to wait in the pastor's study and to have dinner with them. Years later, too, when her friends would say, "How could you bring yourself to sit down to eat with these men who were there to take your husband away, perhaps to his death? How could you be so forgiving, so decent to them?", she would be bewildered at such questions. She always responded with a similar answer, saying that it was time for dinner and they were standing in my way. She elaborated that since they were all hungry and the food was ready, serving it was the most natural thing to do. She found the use of words such as "forgiving" and "decent" to be quite foolish.

The entire village of Le Chambon had a dismissive attitude towards the words expressing moral praise. Like Magda Trocme, almost all interviews conducted by the author had moments where the interviewees would scoff and exclaim, "How can you call us 'good'? We were doing what had to be done." She explained that there was no one else to help them and that it had nothing to do with goodness. It was something that was required at the time, and since they were there to do it, for them, helping these Jews was the most natural thing in the world. The spectacular notion that attributes helping others to the most natural thing human beings can do not only makes kindness an innate quality of humans but also puts into perspective how we define good people. Kindness is, therefore, not a merit of the supremacy of a good human; it is rather the most basic quality humans can exhibit. It was by embracing their most basic human attribute that the people of Le Chambon transformed from ordinary to extraordinary. They did not seek to attempt something spectacular; rather, they stayed attuned to their faith and transfigured it into behaviour, creating stories of faith, valour, and heroism.

Sociological Dimension Of Moral Courage

The moral courage exhibited by the people of Le Chambon under the leadership of their local pastor highlights the sociological dimension of moral courage, which is most often portrayed as an individualistic quality. The story highlights how these outliers or non-conformists realized that in certain situations, following the law means committing a crime. Therefore, these like-minded co-conspirators not only identified the need to display moral courage but also formed a social network to carry out the increasingly dangerous task of helping Jews. The punishment for doing so was becoming harsher and more certain over time, yet they continued doing so through their shared moral beliefs and social ties, making the solitary acts of moral courage a societal practice. They understood that

they were breaking the laws of Vichy and the Nazis. However, they were certain that they did not commit evil as they did not harm their fellowmen. Their moral courage was rooted in the satisfaction that they helped those whom the law aimed at hurting.

The moral courage in Le Chambon morphed into a communal act. Saving and helping the Jews was what the residents did. They did it silently and by acting together. They worked things out, planned everything, and shared the burden. The pacifist views of pastor Trocme became a reality through the network of social ties that extended from the locals to the shopkeepers and from the farmers to the churchgoers. In any society, such shared outcomes can only be achieved through strong social bonds and interaction. A sense of mutual support and encouragement from fellow conspirators and the leader were essential to carry off such a feat of valour right in front of the Vichy government.

Although there are numerous tales of courage narrated in the book, one incident that particularly stood out for me was when the pastor and his two friends, Darcissac and Theis, were taken to the office of the director of the camp for release. However, the release was conditioned to signing an oath to respect the leader, Marshal Petain, and to obey all his orders without question. While respecting all humans was something they endorsed, they disagreed with the second part of the oath, which was contrary to their conscience. Since Petain was delivering Jews to Germans, blind obedience to his orders did not conform to the beliefs of Trocme and Theis. Therefore, they refused to sign an oath that they could not follow. Such was the strength of their character; they chose captivity over a release sanctioned by immoral orders. This story of moral courage makes the reader introspect about one's principles and the degree to which we truly apply these in our lives (Hallie, 1994).

References

Hallie, P. P. (1994). *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed: The story of the village of Le Chambon and how goodness happened there*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.

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