

## In a French fishing town, Holocaust bravery remembered

It took decades for France to come to terms with its role in the Holocaust, but stories of the country's unsung heroes continue to emerge.

By [ELHANAN MILLER](#) July 16, 2013



A member of the Le Guellec family holds up the righteous gentile certificate awarded posthumously to Alfred and Augustine Le Guellec (photo credit: Elhanan Miller/Times of Israel)



The city of Douarnenez, famous for its sardine canning industry (photo credit: Elhanan Miller/Times of Israel)



Atop the Douarnenez city hall, the Israeli flag features in between the French and Breton flags (photo credit: Elhanan Miller/Times of Israel)



YadVashem representatives Norbert and Marie-France Bensaadon, right, stand next to Douarnenez mayor Philippe Paul, center, and members of the Le Guellec family, left, at a monument unveiling ceremony in Douarnenez (photo credit: Elhanan Miller/Times of Israel)

DOUARNENEZ, France - Dora Frydenzon (née Skurnik) was born in Paris on the day the Nazis invaded France. Her parents, Jewish communist activists from Poland, escaped to France in 1936, fleeing arrest for their anti-fascist activities.

“It was May 10, 1940, and my mother was having contractions as the bombs were falling,” Frydenzon said.

Two years later, walking downstairs in a Paris police station, government clerk Alfred Le Guellec, charged with overseeing France’s political refugees, overheard two policemen complaining that they must wake up early the following morning in order to round up the Jews of Paris, including women and children, and transport them to a bicycle race stadium not far from the Eiffel Tower. Over 13,000 Jews were apprehended by the French police as part of the notorious Veld’Hiv Roundup of July 16, 1942. Most were sent to their death at Auschwitz.

Fifty-three years had passed before French President Jacques Chirac acknowledged France's active roll in gathering and deporting its Jewish citizens. But alongside the shameful accounts of treachery and betrayal, different stories continue to emerge in France, of ordinary French citizens who displayed extraordinary courage at their own peril in saving the lives of their fellow Jews.

One of these unsung heroes was a bureaucrat from Brittany, Alfred Le Guellec, who together with his wife Augustine, was posthumously recognized on July 7 as a "righteous gentile" in an emotional ceremony held at his hometown of Douarnenez in the westernmost tip of France.

Upon hearing the news of the roundup, Le Guellec rushed back to his office and warned StéphaSkurnik — holding her two-year-old baby Dora and waiting to renew her papers — of the looming danger. He then ran out to the street and warned every Jew he identified by his yellow star not to sleep at home that night. The Le Guellecs then hid the Skurniks and their baby daughter in a maid's room throughout the remainder of the war, checking in on them regularly.



**Dora Frydenzon (nee Skurnik) at the righteous gentile ceremony in Douarnenez, July 7, 2013 (photo credit: Elhanan Miller/Times of Israel)**

"Le Guellec saved us many times," Frydenzon recounted, adding that the French civil servant provided false papers to a number of her father's communist associates without asking any questions, despite his stringent Catholic upbringing.

"Today I am protecting you, but if the communists win the war you will be protecting me," Le Guellec was quoted by one of his relatives as telling Marcel Skurnik.

The Le Guellecs are among the 3,667 French citizens accorded the title of "righteous gentiles" by YadVashem, Israel's Holocaust commemoration center, since 1963. The French Committee of YadVashem continues to receive testimonials of Jews saved by their non-Jewish neighbors, examines the evidence, and sends the documentation to Jerusalem for final approval.

Dozens of locals, war veterans, and government officials gathered at the town hall of Douarnenez, a small port town and the center of France's sardine industry, for the righteous gentile award ceremony. Under the flags of France and Israel, the relatives of the Le Guellecs (who died childless) received the award on their behalf. Israeli diplomats traveled across France to each of the 80 such ceremonies which took place in 2012 — as well as 33 so far in 2013 — awarding the prestigious distinction.

“He who saves one life, it is as though he saved the entire world,” quoted Michel Lugassy-Harel, head of administrative affairs at Israel’s embassy in Paris, in his speech at the ceremony. “These people saved not only one life, but the honor of their country, France.”

“I feel like I am taking part in a chapter of French history,” said 73-year-old Frydenzon, surrounded by her children and grandchildren. “I am especially moved because here in the hall I have my granddaughter who was my age when this story unfolded.”



Alfred and Augustine Le Guellec (photo credit: courtesy/YadVashem)

Official France has also recognized the roundup of French Jews as part of its history. A law from the year 2000 defines July 16 as “a French national day of memory for racist and anti-Semitic crimes and a day of homage to the righteous of France.” In January 2007, President Chirac unveiled an inscription in France’s Pantheon acknowledging the righteous French as those who “embodied the honor of France and its values of justice, tolerance and humanity.”

Of the estimated 300,000 Jews living in France before the war, 76,000 were deported, of whom 2,500 survived. Many French citizens take pride in the fact that three quarters of the country’s Jews were saved from the Holocaust.

But as the number of living survivors and righteous gentiles dwindles, YadVashem predicts that within three to four years these ceremonies will cease to take place. In 2010, the local chapter of YadVashem has launched a new initiative: a network of municipalities where righteous gentiles lived, cooperating on issues of memory and commemoration. In April 2013, YadVashem sent 20 French mayors and elected officials to the Holocaust Memorial Day ceremony in Jerusalem as part of this network.

Marie-France Bensaadon, the regional YadVashem representative in the Loire Valley, who together with her husband Norbert organized the Douarnenez ceremony, said that the issue of righteous gentiles was a unique way of bringing French citizens closer to Israel.

“This is the best way to speak about Israel without raising any opposition,” Bensaadon told The Times of Israel. “People in France are willing to hear about the Holocaust with no preconceptions. This is the first time many of them have ever heard the words of Israel’s national anthem, Hatikvah.”

The Israeli embassy in Paris also regards the righteous gentile ceremonies as an effective means of public diplomacy.

"It's a non-political way to create cooperation between France and Israel," one embassy employee said.

Bensaadon, who conducts about two ceremonies a year as a volunteer, said the events never cease to touch her.

"I consider this a *mitzvah* (a religious obligation)," she said. "It's always emotional for me and I hope it will continue to be. Once I stop feeling that, it means it's time to quit."



**Elhanan Miller**- Elhanan Miller is the Arab affairs reporter at The Times of Israel