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The Frenchwoman Who Rescued Me

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Il était une fois... once upon a time...

It's not easy for us, Hidden Children, to imagine our individual stories as fairy tales. And yet, here we are, lucky survivors, decades later, in retrospective awe of the people who pulled us out of harm's way.

The good fairy in my early life is named Lucienne Clément de l'Épine. Born in 1911, she married a pharmacist in the Paris suburb of Vincennes, and they had a son, Claude. Like many city folks in the war years, this French family suffered from rationing, but, as Christians, they were not under direct threat from the Vichy government.

One day, early in 1942, Lucienne was asked by Mme Stern, a neighbor in hiding, to take a package of food to a Jewish couple interned at the Compiègne concentration camp. How could she refuse what seemed, on the face of it, to be a 'simple' favor?

But at the camp gate, Lucienne was stopped by a German officer who took her into his office, reprimanding her, "Don't you dare get involved helping Jews. It's none of your business. If you persist, I guarantee you and your family will suffer the consequences."

Her son Claude tells me that this incident triggered his mother's outrage against the Nazi occupation. "Such injustice," she kept repeating. Determined now to help beyond carrying relief packages, she went back to Mme Stern, who, before fleeing Paris, put Lucienne in touch with WIZO, one of the underground Jewish organizations dedicated to hiding youngsters in French convents and on farms.

By then, Lucienne realized that she was entering dangerous territory, not only for herself but for her child and husband. Yet having made her decision, she forged ahead.

Between 1942 and the Liberation in 1944, at first cautious, but steadily more committed, Lucienne, known to her charges as Clément or 'La Dame,' found hiding places for almost 300 Jewish children and several adults.

Leaving for the rural Sarthe *département* from Gare Montparnasse with two or three Jewish kids in tow, Lucienne would pass through French and German police stops with aplomb. To hide some of the children's dark, curly hair, she would push a beret down to their ears. Because it would be foolhardy to be spotted with a



Lucienne Clément de l'Épine and son Claude when she was most active rescuing Jewish children, c. 1943.



A moment when Lucienne's heart and eyes seem to remember the children that were murdered. Yad Vashem, 1990.

et Lucien Lazare
 different set of children at each passage, Lucienne would sometimes shepherd them across railway tracks, guided to safe cars by resistance fighters.

On several occasions, Lucienne was arrested by the Vichy police and the Gestapo. Her 'ordinary' countenance and composure in the face of imminent danger fooled her interrogators time and again.

Arrests were not the only threats that Lucienne faced. Allied bombings, aimed at all forms of transportation, became intense in 1943. As she traveled with several children near Le Mans, the train was hit, destroying the front and rear cars, but they managed to escape. However, after another bombing and ensuing derailment, Lucienne had to walk 22 kilometers in the middle of the night to reach the next town.

Not content with ferrying youngsters to safe houses, Lucienne visited them regularly, checking on their physical and mental health, school needs and clothes - anything to make them feel loved. For this,

she had to build a network of local people, school teachers and clergy - courageous people willing to risk their lives to protect and care for these young victims.

One day, early in 1944, the Gestapo barged into a Vigneux classroom, looking for three brothers named Reichman. As the youngest, Jacques, 8, sat trembling among his classmates, his teacher insisted that the boys had 'disappeared' several weeks ago.

When Lucienne could not take a child directly from his or her parents' home to a safe house, she would bring that child to her own home. Beforehand, Claude would be sent to spend a night or two with Mme Lepiteau, or 'Toto,' a friend of the family who lived nearby.

Taking a walk one day, Toto and Claude passed his house and on a whim, the boy ran inside and came face to face with two frightened boys.

The next day, Lucienne took her son aside and looked him straight in the eye. "I had never seen her so serious," Claude remembers, "then she put her index finger on my lips. You must never tell anyone what you saw. It's a secret between you and me."

From that day on, Claude became his mother's co-conspirator, at times sharing his room but never his secret. Together they traveled to the country with an ever-changing crew of Jewish playmates. The sister of one of them, an older girl "she must have been twelve, and I was eight years old," caught his fancy. "It was the first time I felt this way about a girl, but now I can't even remember her name," he says wistfully.

When the war ended, Lucienne, who had kept careful records, helped WIZO reunite surviving parents and their children. Yet she remained modest and never sought public recognition for her daring wartime deeds.

It was through Lucienne's notes, handwritten on scraps of paper that could be crumpled in an instant in case of a police search that I learned of the 'good woman of Vincennes.'

My name is on one of those notes. It appears next to a date and a time of departure, in 1943, from the Gare d'Austerlitz to Villeneuve-le-Roi, a town a few miles outside of Paris. Lucienne had found a

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