

Chapter 13

The Pyrenees – Beauty and Mystery

“Claire” returned early the next morning to take us by train to Pau. Our helpers in Holland, Belgium, and Paris had told us they usually took the flier from Toulouse south into the mountains toward the little country of Andorra, then guided them to the border and into Spain. Therefore, our train ride with “Claire” along the foothills of the Pyrenees from Toulouse via Tarbes to Pau was a much different route than we had expected. Later, we would understand why.

The date was 10 April, a beautiful spring day. As the train made its way along the side of the mountain range, we could see the beauty of the countryside. My farm experiences reminded me then of all the work that farmers had to do to get their crops started at that season of the year. The fields, vineyards, and orchards blended into the mountains capped with snow that glistened in the sunshine.

Near Lourdes or Tarbes, we saw a large white cross on the side of the mountain, and I thought it stood out like a good omen. The beauty of that train ride was such that I wished I could put the danger of the moment out of my mind and enjoy it like a person on vacation. But beneath all of that beauty was the mystery of what lay ahead for us. Who might lead us where? How many of us would there be? And how many teams of German guards would be trying to prevent us from crossing into Spain? Those questions and many more kept chasing through my mind and kept me from enjoying one of the most beautiful train rides I had ever had. It seemed very fitting that we were

expecting soon to make our break from enemy-occupied land in spring, a time of hope and new life.

As the train pulled into Pau, I was quick to observe a large number of German soldiers. Looking more closely, I saw that they were not like the sharp looking young men we had seen in Paris and Brussels. Most of them looked older, and many had obviously been injured in battle. These were not the men you would expect to see preparing to defend against an invasion. They appeared physically incapable of putting down a large uprising from the Resistance or to launch a significant attack. When I asked "Claire" why they were at Pau in such large numbers, I learned that these Germans, casualties of the war, were using the hospitals and other facilities in the area for medical treatment and R & R (rest & recovery).

As I observed those German soldiers, my thoughts turned to the comments about how the French Resistance forces would take control of the small southern towns like Pau when the invasion was launched. Having seen some of the German soldiers in the area and having been exposed to some of the Free French personnel, I was willing to place my bets on the side of the French Resistance.

We had not seen "Andre" at all on this trip, but when we got off the train in Pau, people were waiting for us. I believe he had been busy somewhere making sure everything went smoothly. We were driven by car several kilometers into a rural area at the foot of the mountains, let out alongside the road, and directed down a country lane to the barn in a farmstead. There, near Navarrenx, France, we would rest and prepare for our travels, which would begin on foot after dark.

"Claire" and "Andre" slipped from our view, and it would be many years before I would learn more about them, why they had been there when we needed them, and how the war had affected their lives. Each person involved in the resistance, regardless of the country, had his or her

own story, but all had certain things in common. Some incident or personal feeling caused each to join in the resistance, and when the war was over, the survivors still had to try putting normal lives back together again.

When I learned more about “Claire” and “Andre,” I was fascinated. Paule Viatel (Resistance code name “Claire”) was a student of the German language. For many years she visited Germany, and during the entire school year of 1936-37 she studied at Fribourg-en-Brisgau, so she saw the rise of Nazism.

In June 1940, Paule was a young teacher of German in a secondary school. When France surrendered to Germany, she knew at once that she must struggle against the German occupation. She felt that it would be the downfall of civilization if Hitler was victorious. Her teaching job was terminated, and she was frustrated about how or with whom to resist.

Her opportunity came when a German professor at the College of Lyon, France, who knew her well asked her to work for the French intelligence services of Vichy, a second level position – not quite the Resistance, but almost. Her job was simply to read German newspapers and magazines, then translate into French the funeral notices and articles pertaining to the sciences such as raising crops and manufacturing synthetic petroleum. This unusual and monotonous work lasted for two years until November 1942 when the Germans moved into what had been known as the “free zone.” Her job was eliminated, but as one activity closed, a new one opened up.

Newspaper men of the liberation interested Paule in the gathering of information, namely information about the movement of German troops. This really was a Resistance matter, and as “Claire” took on the more dangerous task, she was also asked to hide secret agents, some from London, in her apartment.

On 21 June 1943, a meeting was scheduled at Calurie, the suburb in the hills above Lyon. Expected there to develop and coordinate some critical plan were the heads of the Resistance. In spite of the secret methods used to arrange the meeting and to get the men to the designated place at a specific time some mistakes were made. With the meeting delayed for 45 minutes, the Gestapo Chief, Klaus Barbie, and his troop arrived just as the meeting was about to begin. There must have been a leak somewhere. It was quite a haul for Barbie. Among those arrested was Jean Moulin ("Max"), personal envoy of General de Gaulle, Chief of the Resistance. Jean Moulin died under torture without talking when interrogated.

The arrests at that meeting dealt a severe blow to the Resistance in general and came personally close to "Claire." One of the men arrested, and who later died in Germany, was Bruno Larat (code name "Xavier"), a representative of the S.A.P. network for the area around Lyon, the R1. Larat had been using "Claire's" apartment as his hide-out in Lyon. While she had faith that "Xavier" would die without telling anything, "Claire" could not take that risk. She ran toward Spain with no intention of withdrawing from the Resistance. She was welcomed in Toulouse and entrusted with a difficult mission, establishing an escape route toward Spain. The route must have its escorts, its relays, and its parachuting spots. She must not only organize the route but personally escort a group of evades. That was among the most dangerous of all underground responsibilities.

The contacts in such a network were destroyed on a regular basis and the agents arrested. When one link was broken, a whole new chain had to be established. "Claire" was on one of her successful missions, between Chenier Field and the Spanish border, when she and "Andre" escorted Ken and me in mid-April 1944. But not all of her missions went as well as ours.

About a month later, in May 1944, “Claire” was leading a group of eight people toward Spain. In Toulouse, they got on the seven o’ clock train for Saint-Gaudens and got off at Laoave followed by the men she was leading and took a country road to Urau, where her relay, the village blacksmith, was waiting. The weather was good, the trip had been uneventful, and everything seemed easy. A frontwheel drive vehicle which “Claire” was accustomed to seeing approached them. Suddenly the vehicle spun around in a circle of dust, forcing her and her men into the ditch. Four men sprang from the vehicle with machine guns and revolvers drawn. “Claire” recognized the fifth man who was now standing behind the other four looking like a beaten dog. It was Maraval, the one who had helped her establish the network.

They were all ordered out of the ditch, and “Claire” was separated from all the others. She was searched, interrogated, threatened and beaten. They knew she was the leader, but they beat everyone in the group with gun stocks as they were taken to a nearby farmyard. Then they, including Maraval, were locked in a room, and “Claire” came face to face with Maraval. She asked, “What are you doing, Maraval?” Why are you with the Germans?”

He replied, “I was arrested in Toulouse. They took me into some woods and beat me. I did talk. I did talk.”

“You are fortunate; there are no signs of the bruises you received,” “Claire” commented, and Maraval dropped his head ashamed.

The Germans returned and ordered the people out of the room, and while holding machine guns to their backs, had them stand with their faces to a wall. They ordered Maraval to join them and stated, “We are going to knock down-kill the blacksmith.”

“When they returned, they laughed and slapped Maraval on the back. The blacksmith had been shot!

“Claire,” who was wounded and bleeding, was standing with the other prisoners. The Germans were talking, but they did not know that “Claire” understood what they were saying. She detected a let-down in their surveillance as they ordered the farm wife to make them some pancakes. At that point, “Claire” asked for some fresh water so she could wash herself. The request was granted. In the house, she spotted an open window in a room with a partly open door. She entered the room and closed the door so that the policeman could not see her, then immediately jumped through the window and landed on the ground in back of the house. It was a sloping pasture field, and she found herself among a group of dumbfounded reapers. She ran as fast as she could across the open pasture and plunged into some undergrowth in the middle of briars.

She expected to hear shots, but there were none. Perhaps, the Germans had been unable to fire. She ran through the country, through woods, yards and paths. Worn out, she kept going down hills and up slopes. Anything to put distance between her and the farm where her companions were being held. It was the only way to come out alive.

Suddenly, a man appeared at the turn of the road. It was Maraval, waiting there in the dusk. Thinking he must surely be waiting for her, “Claire” wondered if this might be the end. No! She took off again, changed direction, zig-zagging and escaped into the night. Apparently Maraval did not follow her. She went to the village Salies-du-Salat.

Dogs barked as she knocked on a door. A voice inside asked, “Who is there?” “Someone in trouble,” was “Claire’s” reply, and the voice came back, “Go away!” she kept going; she was barefoot with her shoes in her hand. At a turn in the road someone called out, “Who is there?” Weapons rattled! She threw herself into the ditch, and two car headlights came on. The car came closer and passed on. “Claire,” squatting in the ditch, had not been seen. Saved

one more time! She kept going, left the road and crossed fields for more safety. When morning came, she stood exhausted in a hollow on the edge of the river. She looked down at the one shoe she was wearing and realized she must rest through the day to regain some strength for the following night.

At nightfall she started to walk again, but she was soon exhausted and famished. She felt empty-headed and discouraged, but her extraordinary will to live drove her on. When she stopped to collect her thoughts, she realized that she must have help. She needed to make contact with someone in the Resistance, but how was the challenge.

It was 6 am when she knocked on a door. It opened, and the woman standing before her looked at a bloody and beaten “Claire” with clothing torn by the efforts of her escape. When “Claire” asked for help, the woman told her to leave. Then an older lady called from inside to ask who was being told to leave and then said, “I’ve never turned a person in need away from my door. Let her come in.” “Claire” entered and told her story. She showed them her sores and wounds, and they believe her. “We are going to help you,” came their reply.

With their help, “Claire” was able to travel again and get to Boussens where she knew the cook at the Hotel de la Gare, who was a member of the network. The contact was made, the network was notified, and members took her that same night to a safe hiding place. The network then notified Toulouse, and a car was sent for “Claire.” She was back in the fold to recuperate for awhile before resuming activities. The memories of the entire experience are still so strong that “Claire” cannot eat pancakes because it reminds her of those Germans who asked the farm lady to make pancakes for them.

After the invasion of 6 June 1944, “Claire” was helping Brigitte their radio operator, decode messages. In July, one of the messages from London when decoded said, “If

‘Claire’ has escaped she must take the plane for London.” What a shock: the plane would be landing that very night, and the secret field, Aire-sur-Adour, was some 60 kilometers away. She did not wait, said “Good-bye,” and began her bicycle ride to the landing spot. On the road she was stopped, not by the Germans, but by the Maquis who took her to their place for interrogation. They did not believe her story, and just when she was sure the delay would keep her from meeting the plane, a man who knew her walked in and asked why she was there.

She was given assistance and rushed to the landing spot. There were only a few moments. A Hudson bomber plane from London landed momentarily, and she ran to it, climbed in, and they were off. When she looked about in the plane she saw “Andre,” the man who had provided the lookout when she had escorted Ken and me nearly three months before. He had reached the plane and boarded before her. It had been some time since they had seen each other, and neither knew for certain what had happened to the other one.

Upon their arrival in England, “Claire” was assigned to the B.B.C. and used her languages skills to give messages and talk to the French people. Friends heard her in France and told her parents. That is how they found out she was still alive.

After the war was over, she returned to France to teach and to translate books from German into French.

When the Germans invaded France, Jean-Baptiste-Arhex was working in an airplane factory at Toulouse. He was Basque and had lived a free life in a small village between Pau and the French-Spanish border in le Pays Basque.

From the beginning, Jean knew that to resist the Germans he would have to give up his job and take on a new name, as the Gestapo and French police had him identified by his family name. Jean became known as

“Andre,” “Jainy Lafont” or “Sultan II.” He was also recruited by Picard (“Sultan”), the same man who recruited Rene Pontier. “Andre” served with the Liberation Sud, The Armeé Secret (AS) and Rejeaux Action R4 (S.A.P.), the parachute jumping and air supply unit of the Resistance.

I know now that it was no accident that Ken and I went from Pau and crossed the mountains through Basque country with a Basque guide. About those activities “Andre” said, “It was a part of my struggle. We had to search for arms, to transport them, to organize Maquis and the parachuting of arms coming from England.” He was most active in the area from Toulouse south to the Spanish border, but what happened there was also related at times to activities north of Toulouse, where he and “Claire” met us at Chenier Field.

When “Andre” flew out of France in July 1944 with “Claire” to England, it was to prepare for training with a unit that would parachute back in at a later date and further north.

Nearly 40 years later when my wife and I were able to make contact with “Andre” and “Claire,” we found it was Jean and Paule Andrex. They live in an apartment in Paris with a get-away villa some 90 kilometers northwest of Paris near Evreux. The villa’s setting is tranquil and beautiful. I am sure it helps Jean to remember his childhood days in the scenic Basque country at the foot of the Pyrenees.

Jean married someone else soon after the war, and it was years later when Jean and Paule, who had worked together in the Resistance, came together again and were married. I have only known them as a team. Jean retired from his job as an atomic engineer in 1985, but Paule still translates German books into French for a publisher.

When I asked them about the effect their work in the resistance had on their person lives, they both mentioned the difficulty in having to give up their real names for code

names. After the war, the difficulty was building new lives with their real names and adjusting to all the change so they could again live normally. It would appear that they were successful on all counts, except I still call Paule “Claire.” Each of them helped about 100 people, mostly French, evade the Germans and reach Spain. They often helped the same people, but it was all done at great personal risk as part of their resistance effort. I hope they enjoy many more peaceful years together. They have earned them.