

Why do we do the things we do?

In June of 1941, nine months after the promulgation of a similar regulation in occupied France, the Pétain government of Vichy France issued a law requiring all Jews to register in person with the local authorities within 30 days. Among the handful of Jews who then were living in Domme, a thirteenth century fortified village in the Dordogne, were my parents, their close friend Joseph, a Russian artist, and Martin, a Polish writer. My parents had been reunited in Domme after being separated following the fall of France, and this young refugee couple was warmly received by the villagers. A man in the grocery one day was complaining loudly to the proprietor about "all these foreigners" who came to the region to deal in the black market. My father was standing right next to him and said "But look here, I'm a foreigner, and you know that I don't do anything on the black market". "Oh, monsieur Gutman", he replied, "we weren't talking about you, you're one of us. We were talking about the Parisians!"

So what do you do if you're a Jew in World War II and the government asks you to "register"?

My father went to the Town Hall and submitted the required form. The clerk, who was very fond of my parents and had little idea what all the fuss was about, looked at the form and saw that in the space marked "religion" my father had written "*Israelite*", a more formal term than "*Juif*". Puzzled, he sounded out the word, "*ees-rah-el-eet*", and exclaimed, "Why that's wonderful, then you're not Jewish!" But my father enlightened him, and the form was filed.

Joseph, although raised as a Jew, had converted in his teenage years and became a devout mystical Catholic. When he submitted his form the clerk looked at him in surprise and said, "But Monsieur Joseph, you're more Catholic than any of us, you go to Mass every day, sometimes twice!" Joseph explained that the law referred not simply to his religion, but to his racial and ethnic background. He was right, of course. The Nuremberg Race Laws of 1935 required consideration of the religion of all four grandparents in determining a person's "Jewishness". So Joseph conscientiously interpreted the intent of the law, and the form was filed.

Martin reasoned as follows: "If they are asking me for my name and address, it means that they don't have it. And if they don't have it, I'm not going to be the one to give it to them." He simply ignored the order.

What informs such a decision, how can we understand it? How could Martin, a refugee already in a precarious situation, risk immediate arrest by openly violating the law? Why would Joseph, a devout Catholic, so carefully interpret the Nazi's race laws? On the other hand, why would my father, who had barely escaped from Germany only months after Hitler's rise to power in 1933, pursued because of his political activities, voluntarily offer himself up to a government which was actively cooperating with the Nazis? It was at least partly because, although he was Jewish, he was a highly assimilated German - many of his and his family's friends were, in fact, outside the Jewish community. And a good German, naturally, obeys the law. In addition, the clearest alternative to registering was going underground, a difficult and dangerous course. But years later, when asked why he

had made his decision, my father would shake his head and wonder aloud, "Who knows why we do the things we do?"

By the end of 1941, Japan had attacked Pearl Harbor, Germany and Italy had declared war on the US, the German army was on the march in North Africa and in the Soviet Union, and my mother decided it was time to start a family. Many of their friends were convinced my mother was crazy. "How can you bring a child into the world under such circumstances!?" My mother's rationale was simple. She was almost thirty and wanted a family, the present was as good a time as any. As with any family at any time, she said, "We will survive together, or we will perish together". She became pregnant that winter.

In August 26th of the following summer, coinciding with the infamous roundup of Jews throughout the country (the "rafle du Vélodrome d'Hiver"), the police came to the address my father had provided and he was arrested. But they were French police, not Germans, and many of them were not so happy doing the work of the Nazis – "*les Boschs*". They left my mother behind because she was pregnant, and my father made certain that the arresting office noted that fact in his report. They took him away and put him into an internment camp outside nearby Perigeux. But the next day my father was allowed to return home, the magistrate at the camp had released him because his documents indicated he was the future parent of a French citizen - the officers jokingly referred to him as "*le père enceint*" ("the pregnant father"). My mother's pregnancy had saved both their lives. Almost all of those arrested in the Dordogne and throughout France in that "*rafle*", including many thousands of children, were turned over to the German authorities and transported directly to the gas chambers of Auschwitz.

My brother Tom ("Jean-Thomas") was born the night of November 10 of that year, the very day the German army marched in to occupy the formerly "*free*" zone of Vichy France. My mother later recalled that she had been totally oblivious to the noise of the artillery and the air and automobile traffic surrounding them; she was in a completely private world with her newborn infant. But it was too dangerous for my parents to remain where they were, soon afterwards they obtained papers identifying them as French citizens from Alsace (accounting for their German accents) and went underground. My mother, with Tom, entered a home for unwed mothers in nearby Sarlat, and my father went to work on a farm some thirty kilometers away in Bergerac. For the next two years they would see each other only briefly on occasional weekends, until they ultimately made their way to Switzerland in early 1944.

What happened to my father's two friends? Joseph, the devout Catholic, was arrested at the same time as my father, but was released following a last-minute intervention from the highest levels of the Catholic archdiocese. Our families have remained close, and we are still in touch with his daughter and her family in Paris.

What about Martin, the Polish scofflaw? He lived openly and undisturbed through the remainder of the war.