



Quarantine Eve

By Ashley Valanzola

On January 31, I left my D.C.-based university to conduct dissertation research on Holocaust memory in France. Paris was my home base, but my work enabled me to travel throughout the country. Mid-March, I had a trip scheduled to a small town nestled in the Vosges mountains where I was in search of records for a plaque memorializing the area's deported Jews. Unfortunately, mid-March was also when fears over the virus had officially taken hold. I knew traveling was a risk, but the town's records were crucial to one of my dissertation chapters. So, I went.

The train ride from Paris to the town was tense. Some people wore masks, while others frequently applied hand sanitizer to quell their anxiety. For the most part, the train was full of students fleeing the capital and returning home to the safety of their families.

I arrived and checked into my Airbnb, which was a veritable palace compared to the studio I inhabited in Paris. My appointment at the archives was not until the next morning, so I explored a bit of the picturesque Vosgien town. Most businesses were

already closed. Officially, I was still allowed to circulate without restrictions, but glares from local residents said otherwise.

Back at my Airbnb, my anxiety set in as I picked up my dreaded phone—daring to venture a scroll through my Twitter feed. I discovered that President Macron was scheduled to address the country that evening. I tuned in to hear him announce that starting tomorrow at noon, France was entering a period of confinement. Only essential personnel were allowed to work. You could leave your residence to buy “primary necessities” or for brief periods of exercise—that’s all. When in public, you had to carry an attestation, a form that indicated your reason for leaving home. Without it, you would be fined.

After the address, my worries drifted immediately to my appointment at the archives. I was certain archival work was not considered essential during the pandemic. Would the archivist open for me? If she did, technically she would be violating the order scheduled to go into effect at noon. If not, my dissertation chapter on Holocaust memorial plaques could not be finished. I frantically emailed her to ask if I would still be allowed to visit. To my relief, she responded to meet her at 9 am the next morning.

Ten minutes early, I arrived outside the archives, which were located directly across from City Hall. The square was ominously empty. Just after 9 am, the archivist

showed up and led me upstairs to the reading room. As I set up my laptop, she rolled in a cart with all the documents I had previously requested.

Upfront, she was clear I had to finish my work in one day because she could not risk opening the archives in violation of the governmental order again. Four days of archival research condensed into one would have been otherwise unfathomable if it were not for her assistance. Having personally organized the collections related to World War II, she knew where to best direct my attention so I could work as quickly as possible.

Besides going above and beyond what is normally expected in the historian-archivist relationship, she helped an outsider working on a sensitive topic. In looking into a memorial plaque for Jews deported from the town, my research touched upon French complicity in the Holocaust. The Germans could not have deported approximately 76,000 Jews from the country without French collaboration.¹ Even though research related to the Holocaust would not present her town in a favorable light, she never hesitated to help. I could tell she understood the contemporary relevance of my work, especially considering recent antisemitic incidents throughout Europe.

¹ See Serge Klarsfeld, *Mémorial de la Déportation des Juifs de France* (Paris: Fils et Filles des Déportés Juifs de France, 2012).

As we worked, I got to know her a little better. I asked how many Americans had visited the archive. None, as far as she knew. She spoke about her children and how she was nervous about balancing their education with her work responsibilities throughout the quarantine period.

We also talked about the documents themselves. I was looking into one of the families memorialized in the plaque—the Weills. In 1943, the Germans and their French collaborators arrested Simone and Albert Weill, along with their three daughters, all residents of the town.² At one point as we discussed the specific circumstances of their arrest, she looked at me and asked—weren't we, the French, horrible?

The question came as a shock. Unsure how to reply, I frowned and mumbled something incoherent. My response fell far short of what I hoped to articulate. I should have said what I was really thinking: the dedication she put into her work was impressive, especially as it forced her to confront a painful local past. In going out of her way to help me, during a pandemic nonetheless, she helped preserve the memory of the Weills through historical work.

Thanks to her, in record timing I finished the research I needed to complete. Before leaving, she handed me a print out of the new attestation. This paper protected

² See Denise Baumann, *Une Famille comme les autres : lettres réunies et présentées par Denise Baumann* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1973).

me from a potential fine as I made my way back to the Airbnb. I had been so wrapped up with my archival work, the escalating health crisis had receded from my thoughts.

Paper in hand, I left the world of the archives and returned to the reality of the virus. Little did I know, my COVID-19-related troubles were just beginning. From cancelled trains, to archival closures, mixed with worry for family and friends, I was forced to adapt as best as possible. In the days that followed, whenever I struggled with loneliness and fear, I thought back to that intrepid archivist who helped an out-of-place American on quarantine eve.

