

The sorrow and the pity

An Uncertain Hour

The French, the Germans, the Jews, the Klaus Barbie Trial and the City of Lyon, 1940-45

by Ted Morgan

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Frederic Raphael

Ted Morgan is the Anglo-Saxon anagram for De Gramont, the author's original name. The biographer of Churchill, Maugham and Roosevelt, Morgan escaped from France in 1942. His father, a fighter pilot, died in a flying accident in England in 1943. The boy became as American as a Frenchman can; his book is expertly written, but—unlike earlier work—it shows signs of the author's mother tongue. Morgan generally affects a tough manner, but here toughness is laced with passion. *An Uncertain Hour* is a work of piety (dedicated to de Gramont *pere*) and, one guesses, of painful reminiscence. Those who cannot endure the sight of re-opened wounds should abstain.

Morgan's method is that of a *collagiste*: he has contrived a patchwork of personal history, archive material, published memoir and imaginative reconstruction which, despite some blemishes and outbreaks of journalese, deserves (as it solicits) a large readership. Its tone is, on the whole, implacably fair. Vichy is anatomised in all its smug incarnations, from the unfortunate Pierre Pucheu (who tried to change allegiances in mid-stream) to the devious prime minister Laval, but

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Morgan himself has found many brave cases of early revolt. As Louis Malle's film *Lacombe, Lucien* so memorably showed, the decision to join the Resistance or to collaborate could depend on almost random circumstance. Jean Moulin, who was betrayed to Klaus Barbie, was an *hautfonctionnaire*, prefect of the Eure-et-Loire, when the Germans came. He was ordered to confirm

that a set of mutilated corpses were the result of rapes by French Senegalese troops. When he refused, he was struck by a German officer. It may be that Moulin would, in any event, have become a Resistance leader, but that vile intimation of the meaning of Nazism confirmed the courage which Barbie (and the traitor Rene Hardy) was to drive to the tragic limit.

The paradox of the Vichy policy towards the Jews runs through the whole skilfully plotted text. French anti-semitism had a long, distinguished history. No scapegoat could have been more popularly anathematised than the Jews, especially those of foreign origin (in the end, of course, all of them, including holders of the Pour Le Merite, the highest decoration for gallantry, were so regarded by the headline *purs et durs*). Petain underwrote a policy of malice which would give the French an enemy weak enough to be beaten. Individual and corporate cases of denunciation were frequent. And yet, finally, anti-semitism disgusted more than it recruited.

If this eventual revulsion did not save 72,000 French citizens from the gas chambers, it did perhaps provoke a conscientious revolt which left France, after the liberation, with a measure of belief in its own honour. The case of the children's home at Izieu, deliberately betrayed, still stands, however, as the very instance of ignominy.

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It is not a new story. What gives it urgency here is the sense that the author, for all his self-effacement, is

forcing himself to rediscover the France from which, with his mother, he escaped in 1942. He returns and finds the sleeping ugliness. He wakes the ghosts and listens with painfully rejuvenating horror to twice-told tales. He inhabits them with almost tactless impotence: the thoughts attributed to Jean Moulin as he approaches the fatal ambush in Lyon may be plausible, but they can scarcely be authentic. Nevertheless, the atmosphere of Lyon, in those savage days, is tersely, splendidly, evoked. Lyon is, we realise, the stomach of France rather than its heart.

The *dosage* of personal and politico-historical material is very well judged. Some stories, not least that of the courage of Serge Klarsfeld's father, Arno, who deliberately sacrificed himself to save the family he had hidden in a cupboard, are almost unendurable in their nobility. Serge, whose persistence (and that of his wife) helped to remind the post-war world of what it would have been happy to forget, even now cannot bear the sound of hangers rattling on a rail. The last time he saw his father was from his hiding place behind hanging clothes.

It took more than 40 years for

Klaus Barbie to be extracted from his Bolivian lair and brought to trial in Lyon. Thanks to Robert Badinter (whose father was done to death by Barbie), the death penalty had been abolished in France. The accumulation of such ironies may seem too neatly tailored, but for all the occasional vulgarities, misprints and inaccuracies (the author of *La Ronde*, Schnitzler, is alleged to be "Schnitzel"), *The Uncertain Hour* is a memorable compilation, fully justifying Ted Morgan's decision to escape from his American closet and prove himself the true son of Gabriel de Gramont.