

# Victims of Vichy, victims of France

**I**F THE deranged killer of Rene Bousquet, the former Vichy government police chief, acted criminally in the eyes of the French authorities, it must also be said that he acted conveniently. Bousquet's murder on June 8 came barely a month before France's first annual day of official remembrance for victims of Vichy's "racist and anti-semitic persecutions."

As a result, when prime minister Edouard Balladur delivered his remembrance day speech in Paris on July 16, he was no longer obliged to explain how the man who had organised many of those "racist and anti-semitic persecutions" was still leading, at 84, the comfortable life of a retired banker barely a mile away on the Avenue Raphael.

Though coincidental, the death of Bousquet and the introduction of a remembrance day for Vichy's victims have dramatised a national dilemma for France in which history, morality and politics each plays a part, the dilemma of whether Vichy, the wartime government of Marshal Philippe Petain, which sought to lead a defeated and part-occupied France along the "way of collaboration" with Hitler, is a chapter of French history best remembered, or best forgotten.

The inaugurating of a remembrance day may argue that the first of those sentiments - to remember - has gained the high ground. But Rene Bousquet, while he lived, proved the enduring power of those who would rather forget.

He displayed to his end a grim confidence that he would never be required to face trial for his part in the deportation of some 75,000 Jews from France to the Nazi death camps.

"If they want to mess with me," he said shortly before his death, "then fine ... I will defend myself, and I have the material to do so. But I will be utterly astonished if the trial takes place."

It was with Bousquet's authority that French police arrested 13,000 Jews in Paris on July 16-17 1942, including 4,000 children whom even the Nazis had been willing to spare. Most were held in the Velodrome d'Hiver, a since-demolished bicycle track, before being sent to French-

run concentration camps south of Paris - and thence to Auschwitz.

The date of the start of that round-up having been fixed for the new remembrance day, the ceremony in Paris was held at the site of the Velodrome, where unofficial ceremonies have taken place in past years. In the course of a short and solemn speech, the prime minister declared that France was "in mourning," and repeated the promise given by President Francois Mitterrand that a monument would be

erected "to perpetuate the memory of what took place here."

*Suppressing Vichy's shame helped restore French morale and unity after the war. But how, 50 years on, can the Republic now respond honourably to the suffering of victims? asks Robert Cottrell*

erected "to perpetuate the memory of what took place here."

Until that monument arises, the perpetuation of memory will rest heavily on the work of Serge Klarsfeld, the French lawyer and Nazi-hunter who published his investigation of Bousquet 10 years ago in a book called *Vichy-Auschwitz*. Impelled by Klarsfeld, the French public prosecutor eventually charged Bousquet in 1991 with "crimes against humanity" (which under French law enjoy no statute of limitation); but the case vanished into such thickets of procedural delay that the prospective defendant was not alone in his doubts that it would ever reach court.

Bousquet had already walked free from one post-war trial in 1949 because the courts at that time were concerned with treason, not genocide, even though the leaders of Vichy had furthered both causes. A half-century later, he was the last survivor of those who planned the worst of Vichy's persecutions. To

that extent, his death has given one irreversible victory to those who think Vichy best forgotten.

The possibility has been lost for ever of a great pedagogical trial which might have examined and judged not only Bousquet himself, but also, through him, the regime of which he was a part. French courts may yet try Paul Touvier, a former officer in the collaborationist Militia, for alleged war crimes. But Touvier was a relatively low level figure, and is in any case charged with acting on the orders of the Gestapo, not of Vichy.

To explain the last and decisive hesitations of French justice in respect of the Bousquet case, Klarsfeld and others have pointed a finger at President Mitterrand, who worked for the Vichy government from 1941-42 before entering the resistance. Mitterrand reputedly met Bousquet in Vichy, and they moved in the same political circles after the war.

Klarsfeld suggests that Mitterrand may nurse a "nostalgia for his youth." It is, at any rate, an observable truth that the further the French president's motives and actions extend into his past, the more impenetrable they become.

If Mitterrand did indeed choose discreetly to discourage Bousquet's trial, then he may well have done so partly out of a political judgment that such a trial would not be in the public interest; partly out of a personal loyalty; and partly out of that strange private reservoir of affections which has also led him to send a bouquet of roses to Marshal Petain's tomb each November 11, the anniversary of the ending of the first world war.

Only after a barrage of criticism from his friends as well as political rivals last November did the president finally concede that he would have to find a way of managing differently the "contradictions of history." His decree, three months later, instituting the remembrance day for Marshal Petain's victims, must be read as a realisation of that promise.

In opposing a judicial reopening of the great questions of Vichy, President Mitterrand would also have been echoing the policy of France since the Liberation. It was