

The Sisters and Fathers of Notre-Dame de Sion

Notre-Dame de Sion is the name of two religious congregations, founded in Paris in the 19th century, originally to pray for the conversion of the Jews while at the same time forbidden by the founder Theodore Ratisbonne, to proselytize. For decades prior to 1940, Notre-Dame de Sion had been involved with others advocating for better relationships between Christians and Jews. Under the leadership of Fr. Théomir Devaux, the Fathers of Sion ran a meeting center for Jews and Christians which included a library and eventually a periodical, *La Question d'Israël*. Their residence was one of the meeting places for Jews and Christians engaged in philosemitic rethinking of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. The Sisters were established throughout France, engaged for the most part in education and in running residences for women, but also in social service, especially among poor Jewish immigrants. In Paris, some were also engaged in the work of encounter fostered by the Fathers. Both Fathers and Sisters were known for their work with Jewish catechumens. Their houses were also meeting places for the Archconfraternity of Prayer for Israel (API), a world-wide organization founded in 1905 by Sion with the two-fold purpose of praying for the conversion of the Jews and working for the eradication of anti-Semitism.

In 1940 the library of the Fathers of Sion was confiscated and *La Question d'Israël* shut down. Devaux then focused on organizing a group of Sisters of Sion and others to hide Jews. Hundreds of Jewish children and adults were hidden in Paris and in the countryside. Girls were hidden in Sion boarding schools, not only in Paris, but also in Grenoble, Marseille, and Saint Omer. Adults were also hidden in some of the houses; young women were hidden in the residences for women in Lyon, Marseille and elsewhere. The house of Grand Bourg, outside Paris, sheltered adults and children, and sometimes served as a resting place for the exhausted.

Sisters collaborated in rescue networks throughout France. Teams of priests, religious, and lay people – Catholics, Protestants, Jews and unaffiliated people – worked together. The work of rescue included not only finding lodging, but supplying identity papers, ration cards, clothing, medicine – everything necessary for daily life. Sisters did not always know what was going on in other houses, nor were they connected to the Motherhouse in Paris. Everything was on a need-to-know basis.

Particularly significant in the work of rescue were the Ancelles, a group of Sisters who wore lay clothes, and lived alone or in small groups in Jewish neighborhoods, particularly among the poor. Although a minority among the Sisters, most of whom lived in traditional convents, their numbers were disproportionately high among the rescuers.

During this period, the Fathers and Sisters, especially in Paris, continued to prepare for baptism, Jewish converts, adults and children. There is no evidence that rescue and assistance was related to a willingness to be baptized and the records show that no children were baptized while they were hidden in the Paris school.

These are facts. The stories of the people involved bring these facts to life, inspiring us with their courage as well as enlightening the magnitude of the tragedy that made their efforts so necessary.

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