

## **Reading Guide for Jacques Lazarus' *Jews in Combat*<sup>1</sup>**

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*Jews in Combat* is a testimony given by Jacques Lazarus on the work of a Resistance movement. Lazarus, who was also known as Captain Jacquel, was the head of the Parisian branch of the Jewish Combat Organization<sup>2</sup>.

The Center for Contemporary Jewish Documentation. "Studies and monographs" n°9. Paris: Éditions du Center, 1947, 153 pgs.

The book begins with a preface by Henri Hertz (1875-1966), the poet, novelist, and literary critic who was involved in the Jewish Resistance and saw the maquis<sup>3</sup> of Captain Jacquel "up close". Hertz said, "I had the honor of being considered a loyal friend by all of them."

Jacques Lazarus' account of his journey as a Resistance fighter follows this preface, but lengthy parenthetical sections about the fighters of the Jewish Armed Forces—the group that later became the Jewish Combat Organization—are interspersed throughout.

The work is organized in brief chapters, most of which are three to four pages long. The story is generally chronological but is punctuated by chapters devoted to the organization of the Jewish Army<sup>4</sup> and to the operations that were carried out by its various comrades-in-arms in Lyon, Grenoble, Nice, and Toulouse. The structure of the story does not always facilitate an understanding of Lazarus' involvement in Resistance efforts. Lazarus was sometimes a direct witness to actions carried out but he also, very often, recounts events concerning the Jewish Army that he did not experience, more than often without citing his sources. Thus, one may read lengthy elaborations on Nice and on the different activities of the "Niçois"<sup>5</sup> of the Jewish Army," on the refugee-smuggling operations to both Spain and Switzerland, the latter having been put into place as of 1941 before experiencing a resurgence in activity after the Italian armistice on

September 8, 1943. A great number of Jews, many of whom were children, would be transported to Switzerland. This was done with the help of young people from the Zionist Youth Movement<sup>6</sup> and the Israelite Scouts, as well as with the involvement of some Swiss customs officers, who allowed them to pass through the two border crossings of Annemasse and Saint-Julien-en-Genevois. Many pages of Lazarus' story are devoted to the selflessness of these anonymous Resistance fighters, and—after many of them were arrested—the courage that they showed when facing their executioners.

As for Jacques Lazarus, he firstly recalls that he was a career non-commissioned officer and that after the Armistice<sup>7</sup> he was required to submit a file to the General Commission for Jewish Questions in order to remain in the army, but that he was nonetheless discharged from the army in August 1941. He then found work at the Comptoir National d'Escompte<sup>8</sup> in Lyon.

Lazarus said that until November 11, 1942—the date that the “Free Zone” was invaded by German troops—he had made only a few connections with Resistance fighters and had distributed only a handful of leaflets and newspapers. From November 1942 to February 1943, he tried, without success, to leave France in order to become a French Foreign Legionnaire<sup>9</sup>. On the train from Toulouse to Lyon, Lazarus met his former childhood friend from Strasbourg, Ernest Lambert. It was Lambert who, in March 1943, enrolled Lazarus in the Jewish Armed Forces, an organization that was created in Toulouse after the armistice. An important mission was entrusted to him by the Central Steering Committee of the Jewish Army: establish Groupes Francs<sup>10</sup> in the Italian Occupied Zone,<sup>11</sup> where large numbers of Jews were placed in “allocated residences,” but in an area in which the occupying regime was “very tolerable”.<sup>12</sup>

Jacques Lazarus first settled in Valence, then in Bourg de Péage<sup>13</sup> as an insurance agent. However, he regularly went to Grenoble where he formed a small group of young, Jewish

Resistance fighters. Lazarus then settled in Grenoble and continued to live there using his real name. In the surrounding area, he taught the basics of topography, combat, and weapons handling to young foreigners and stateless people. After the Italian Zone was occupied by German troops, following the Italian armistice of September 8, 1943, Lazarus often went to Saint Gervais and Megève where he instructed new recruits in the neighboring woods. It was also during this time that he took on a false identity.

In October 1943, Lazarus received the order to go to Toulouse where he met Maurice Ferrer, also known as “the soul of the Resistance organization”. Ferrer entrusted Lazarus with the task of establishing a maquis. Lazarus needed to make contact with the Secret Army of Tarn, to instruct the first group of Resistance fighters who were located at the Bec farm, an abandoned farm approximately 10 miles from Saint Jean de Jeanne near Albi<sup>14</sup>. Lazarus then returned to Grenoble, where he remained until January 1, 1944, at which time, he returned to Lyon to join Ernest Lambert. Lambert was one of the leaders of the Lyon-based faction of the Jewish Army. After a few days, Lazarus returned to Toulouse, where he was put in charge of building up the maquis in the Tarn region.

Two abandoned farms near Albi were allocated for the activities of the Jewish Army. These included the Bec farm, which was intended to receive the first military group of underground Jews, of which some were Dutch Jews. Lazarus made regular trips there and was struck by “the kindness and tireless dedication of the region’s inhabitants”. On the occasion of his last visit to inspect the Bec farm in March 1944, Lazarus found it empty, as the order for the maquis to withdraw had been given after the Gestapo arrested Captain Michel, the head of the Secret Army in Albi. Lazarus walked to the village of Paulinet, where the town hall secretary

told him that, not far from there, many cases of food had been airdropped, likely by mistake. With the help of local peasants, Lazarus hid these containers in an abandoned mill.

At this time, the Tarn maquis were regrouped near the town of Lacaune. These were units of the Secret Army, the Francs-Tireurs et Partisans,<sup>15</sup> the Jewish Army, and a few Russians and Yugoslavs who had defected from the German army. Each individual maquis had lost its autonomy, but the different groups were now assembled into companies under the command of battalion chief Le Floc. Lazarus travelled to Lacaune several times and spoke with Le Floc, who was astonished to see that the members of the Jewish unit wore, on their epaulets, a blue and white badge with the Star of David. Lazarus replied that “Hunted as Jews, it is as Jews that we fight.”

After the attack on the Lacaune camp, one group of maquis was transferred Espinassier, a small, abandoned village near Mazamet. Lazarus travelled there several times; the last time to bring ration cards from the village to be renewed in Toulouse.

On June 7, 1944, Mr. Ferrer was almost arrested in Toulouse. After this incident, and after changing his identity once again, Lazarus was given an assignment in Paris, where he had not set foot since 1937. This mission consisted of meeting Lydia and Charles Porel. Charles, who was very British in appearance, was a former member of the International Brigades<sup>16</sup>. He was tasked with aiding Lazarus and one of his comrades to leave for London, where they would ratify an agreement that the Jewish Army would be recognized under the name “The Jewish Combat Organization”. After Lazarus’ return to Toulouse, he once again travelled to Paris on the last Saturday in June.

On July 17, Charles Porel presented Lazarus with a guide who was supposed to take him, and his comrade, to the site where the plane would take off for London. But this "guide" was an

agent of the Gestapo. Lazarus and his comrade were taken to the Gestapo's headquarters on Rue de la Pompe, where they were "lucky" to be regarded of as simple liaison agents.

They were then transferred to Fresnes, where they remained detained for three weeks. On August 11, 1944, they were taken by bus to Drancy. Their route took them across Paris, where "an atmosphere of revolt reigned". On August 17, Lazarus was one of 50 Jewish hostages leaving Bobigny station who were crammed into a train car that was attached to a military convoy made up of SS. The convoy had been moving slowly and stopping frequently since August 17th, and on the 21st, Lazarus and the other hostages managed to unscrew the bar of the skylight and jump from the train. He first walked for more than 30 miles. Then, while hitchhiking on the road from Saint Quentin to Paris, he was given a lift by a car occupied by Luftwaffe soldiers<sup>17</sup>. He rode in this car for almost 50 miles during which it was shot at by Allied planes equipped with machine guns. Lazarus arrived at the house of a baker in Jaux near Compiègne, where he saw the first French Forces of the Interior,<sup>18</sup> and the first American tanks on the other side of the Oise River.

After returning to Paris, Lazarus saw Charles Porel<sup>19</sup> once again, a few weeks after the Liberation, at the offices of the Judicial Police. After having originally denied it, Porel admitted that he was in fact an Austrian. He confessed that he had indeed been a captain in the International Brigades, and that he had apparently worked for the Allied Intelligence Services before betraying the Resistance in 1943 and becoming part of the Nazi's Enemy-Tracking Unit (*Feindliches Aktivitätskontrolle*) the group that was responsible for infiltrating Allied Intelligence systems.

The story ends with a short chapter entitled: "And now..." that alternates between a certain nostalgia for a long-gone fight with its camaraderie between Resistance fighters, and the

disillusionment of seeing “thousands of Jews confined in the same camps in Germany, trying in vain to return to their ancestral homeland.” This sentiment is followed by a list of different comrades in arms, and in some cases, their post-war life choices. Certain among them chose to relocate to Palestine, “the land of hope”.

“The remedy is neither despair nor disgust towards oneself nor towards others; rather, it is always and can only be action which endlessly maintains and regenerates life.”

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*Edited by Julin Everett, Scripps College.*

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all annotations are the original work of the translator.

<sup>2</sup> The Jewish Combat Organization is also commonly referred to as the Jewish Fighting Organization in English. This was an underground, Jewish Resistance group originally founded in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising to resist Jewish deportations. This organization later absorbed the Jewish Army, or l'Armée Juive. Yad Vashem. "Jewish Fighting Organization, Warsaw." Yad Vashem, n.d., [www.yadvashem.org](http://www.yadvashem.org). Accessed 10 May 2024.

<sup>3</sup> The Maquis were small, informal, and belligerent Resistance forces. *Maquis* translates to underbrush, which these Resistance groups used as physical cover. Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Resistance". Encyclopedia Britannica, 8 Oct. 2021, <https://www.britannica.com>. Accessed 10 May 2024.

<sup>4</sup> The Jewish Army was also known as l'Armée Juive. It was an underground Resistance organization created in 1940. It aimed to rescue Jews and engage in struggles against the Nazis. Yad Vashem: The World Holocaust Remembrance Center. "Jews Who Saved Jews in France during the Holocaust." Yad Vashem, n.d., [www.yadvashem.org](http://www.yadvashem.org). Accessed 10 May 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Niçois are residents of Nice, France.

<sup>6</sup> Created in 1941, the Zionist Youth Movement was created to incorporate and centralize all youth movements. It focused on rescue missions for deported Jews. Yad Vashem: The World Holocaust Remembrance Center. "Jews Who Saved Jews in France during the Holocaust." Yad Vashem, n.d., [www.yadvashem.org](http://www.yadvashem.org). Accessed 10 May 2024.

<sup>7</sup> The Second Armistice at Compiègne was signed on June 22, 1940 between Nazi Germany and the capitulating French Third Republic.

<sup>8</sup> The Comptoir National d'Escompte was an old bank in Paris and a predecessor of the modern BNP Paribas bank. Stoskopf, N. "The Founding of the Comptoir national d'escompte de Paris, Revolutionary Bank (1848)." HES, vol. 21, no. 3, 2002, pp. 395-411.

<sup>9</sup> The French Foreign Legion is an elite, voluntary special force in the French military. Legionnaires are deployed overseas. Porch, Douglas. "French Foreign Legion". Encyclopedia Britannica, 10 May. 2024, <https://www.britannica.com>. Accessed 11 May 2024.

<sup>10</sup> "Groupes Francs" (GF) was an umbrella term denoting various Resistance organizations. See H.R. Kedward. *In Search of the Maquis*. Oxford U.P., 1993, 292-293.

<sup>11</sup> During World War II, Mussolini's Italian government occupied nine departments in Southeastern France. SICA, EMANUELE. *Mussolini's Army in the French Riviera: Italy's Occupation of France*. University of Illinois Press, 2016. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/j.ctt19cc1w3>. Accessed 11 May 2024.

<sup>12</sup> Italian military personnel were given explicit instructions to avoid angering French nationalists. Consequently, living conditions in Italian-Occupied France were very different from those in Nazi-Occupied regions. Many Jews found a (temporary) safe-haven in Italian-Occupied regions. SICA, EMANUELE. *Mussolini's Army in the French Riviera: Italy's Occupation of France*. University of Illinois Press, 2016. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/j.ctt19cc1w3>. Accessed 11 May 2024.

<sup>13</sup> Bourg de Péage is a small commune located in the Drôme department, which is a part of the Auvergne Rhône-Alpes region in South-East France. Ville de Bourg de Péage, [www.bourgdepeage.com/](http://www.bourgdepeage.com/). Accessed 30 June 2024.

<sup>14</sup> Albi is the capital of the Tarn department, located in Southern France. Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Albi". Encyclopedia Britannica, 15 Aug. 2023, <https://www.britannica.com>. Accessed 10 May 2024.

<sup>15</sup> This was the violent Resistance wing of the National Front, created through the merger of three Communist Resistance organizations. "EHRI - Francs-Tireurs et Partisans." EHRI Portal, [https://portal.ehri-project.eu/authorities/ehri\\_cb-368](https://portal.ehri-project.eu/authorities/ehri_cb-368). Accessed 1 March 2024.

<sup>16</sup> The International Brigades were groups of volunteers who fought against the Spanish Republic in the Spanish Civil War. They were mobilized by a desire to fight against fascism. Additionally, many of these volunteers were communist. Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "International Brigades". Encyclopedia Britannica, 17 Feb. 2024, <https://www.britannica.com>. Accessed 11 May 2024.

<sup>17</sup> The Luftwaffe are the aviators of the German military. The section was formally founded in 1935 and was incredibly active and recognizable throughout World War II. Ray, Michael. "Luftwaffe". Encyclopedia Britannica, 9 Mar. 2024,

<https://www.britannica.com>. Accessed 11 May 2024.

<sup>18</sup> The Forces Françaises de L'Intérieur (FFI) were organized in August 1944 under the combined efforts of Resistance organizations to lead an insurrection in Paris. Their activities preceded the arrival of General De Gaulle on August 26, 1944. Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Free French". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 7 Jun. 2024, <https://www.britannica.com>. Accessed 27 June 2024.

<sup>19</sup> Note from original. Charles Porel's actual name was Karl Rehbein.