Disrupted Histories, Recovered Pasts
Histoires Perturbées, Passés Retrouvés

Child evacuees in the Creuse
A summary

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http://dsrupdhist.hypotheses.org/
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Disrupted Histories, Recovered Pasts is a joint UK-France (AHRC Care for the Future - LABEX Pasp) research project funded through the documenting historical experiences of disruption and recovery in post-conflict and post-colonial contexts (UK ref. AH/N504579/1).

Our project proposes a cross-disciplinary analysis and cross-case synthesis of oral histories and History in post-conflict and postcolonial contexts. Our focus is the potentially 'disruptive' effects of oral histories and non-academic histories within formal written history and historiography, across a series of historical cases of displacement.

In the postconflict and colonial contexts of our cases, ‘disruption’ is present in three senses:
- as the productive ways in which multiple experiences retrieved through oral histories may refract and revise historical analysis;
- as the happening histories of objectively disruptive events break the flow of individual and collective experience;
- and as a strategy for cross-disciplinary research to disrupt and democratise conventional understanding by drawing attention to occluded experiences.

'Recovery' is also polysemic, invoking retrieval of past experiences, and the possibility for enhanced well-being, through voicing memories that may have been suppressed and attending to mismatches between public discourse about displaced groups and individual experience.

Lead academics are Sian Sullivan, Bath Spa University (Principal Investigator and Project Coordinator), Michèle Baussant, Université Paris Nanterre (Principal Investigator), Lindsey Dodd, University of Huddersfield (Co-Investigator), Olivette Otele, Bath Spa University (Co-Investigator) and Irène dos Santos, Université Paris Diderot (Co-Investigator).

Histoires Perturbées, Passés Retrouvés est un projet de recherche Franco-Britannique (AHRC Care for the Future - LABEX « Les passés dans le présent») qui explore des expériences historiques perturbées et retrouvées dans des contextes post-conflicts et postcoloniaux.


Dans les contextes post-conflicts et postcoloniaux de notre recherche, la notion d’« interruption » est présente de trois manières:
- comme moyen permettant aux expériences multiples retrouvées grâce à l’histoire orale, de modifier l’analyse historique ;
- comme la survenance d’histoires perturbées, qui interrompe le flux des expériences individuelles et collectives;
- comme une stratégie de recherche interdisciplinaire démocratisant l’accès à la compréhension en attirant l’attention sur les expériences ouclusives.

Le terme «Rétablissement» est aussi polysémique. Il évoque le recouvrement d’expériences passées et la possibilité d’améliorer le bien-être grâce à l’expression des souvenirs. Il permet d’analyser l’inadéquation entre le discours public sur les groupes de personnes et leurs expériences individuelles.

Les Responsables du projet sont Sian Sullivan, Bath Spa University (Chercheur principal et Project Coordinator), Michèle Baussant, Université Paris Nanterre (Chercheur principal), Lindsey Dodd, University of Huddersfield (Co-chercheur), Olivette Otele, Bath Spa University (Co-chercheur) et Irène dos Santos, Université Paris Diderot (Co-chercheur).
Disrupted Histories, Recovered Pasts Working Paper Series

The Disrupted Histories, Recovered Pasts Working Paper Series aims to facilitate rapid distribution of research findings and work in progress by researchers associated with the project. We also welcome relevant contributions by post-graduate students and other associates of the project. The series aims to open up discussion among the global community of scholars, policymakers and practitioners on pressing issues concerning heritage, memory and commemoration. Our working papers are available to download free of charge in PDF format via the project’s website at http://dsrupdhist.hypotheses.org/.

All our papers are peer reviewed, the copyright is retained by the author(s), and authors are welcome to publish further iterations of papers in journals and other formats (references and notes may be formatted as appropriate for such future publications). Papers in joint authorship include a contribution statement as an early footnote. Acronyms present in each working paper are also listed in an early footnote.

The opinions expressed in the papers are solely those of the author(s) and should not be attributed to the project funders, Bath Spa University, or partner universities and organisations. We welcome comments on individual working papers, which should be directed to the author(s).

Histoires Perturbées, Passés Retrouvés Série de Documents de Travail

La série de documents de travail Histoires Perturbées, Passés Retrouvés vise à faciliter la diffusion rapide des résultats de recherches et des travaux en cours par les chercheurs associés au projet. Nous accueillons également les contributions pertinentes d’étudiants de troisième cycle et d’autres chercheurs associés au projet. La série vise à ouvrir la discussion au sein de la communauté internationale, incluant chercheurs, décideurs et praticiens, sur des questions urgentes concernant le patrimoine, la mémoire et la commémoration. Nos documents de travail peuvent être téléchargés gratuitement au format PDF sur le site Web du projet à l’adresse http://dsrupdhist.hypotheses.org/.

Tous nos articles sont soumis à un examen par les pairs. Le droit d’auteur est conservé par les auteurs et ces derniers sont invités à publier d’autres versions d’articles dans des revues et sous d’autres formats (les références et les notes peuvent être formatées en conséquence). Les articles en co-auteurs incluent un énoncé de contribution comme note de bas de page. Les acronymes présents dans chaque document de travail figurent également dans une note de bas de page.

Les opinions exprimées dans les articles sont uniquement celles des auteurs et ne doivent pas être attribuées aux bailleurs de fonds du projet, à l’Université Bath Spa, ni aux universités et organisations partenaires. Nous vous invitons à laisser des commentaires sur les documents de travail individuels. Ces derniers peuvent directement être adressés à l’auteur(s).
Child evacuees in the Creuse: a summary

Lindsey Dodd

Abstract.
From the spring of 1943, thousands of children from the industrial suburbs of Paris were evacuated away from the capital because of food shortages and the increasingly heavy Allied air raids. Around 8,500 of these children were sent to the rural département of the Creuse, where they were billeted with families. There has been little historical interest in the evacuation of French children during the Second World War, and my research for this project has made use of archival sources and oral history interviews to fill this gap. I contend that although many of these evacuees did not experience combat, violence or persecution, their evacuation to the Creuse had a profound impact on their lives thereafter. This Working Paper is not intended as a scholarly analysis (this can be found in publications forthcoming elsewhere), but instead provides an accessible summary of the content of the oral history interviews conducted by the author in 2017.

A full translation into French can be found on this website, entitled Histoires Perturbées, Passés Retrouvés Série de Documents de Travail No 2b: Les enfants évacués dans la Creuse : un résumé.

Key words. Children, France, Second World War, evacuation, oral history, family

1. Introduction

In spring 1942, the Royal Air Force bombed the Renault factories in the western Paris suburb of Boulogne-Billancourt, killing hundreds and making many thousands homeless. The Germans were using these factories to manufacture tanks and military lorries. In spring 1943, the US Army Air Forces bombed Renault again, again with many civilian casualties. The authorities decided to close all schools in the industrial suburbs of the Seine département and evacuate children aged between six and fourteen years. These children spent several months, years or even a lifetime in the rural centre of France. Around 8,500 of those child evacuees ended up in the Creuse.

In spring 2017, with the help of local press and local people, I began searching for people willing to be interviewed for my research. I am studying the experiences of child evacuees in wartime France and have examined archives in the Paris suburbs and in the Creuse. I was looking for people who had been child evacuees or had hosted child evacuees in their families. It seemed likely I would be contacted by people who felt they had something to say – either those who had positive experiences or those who had negative ones. In fact, I got none of the latter – which is not to say that they do not exist. The archives show that certain children were badly treated before or during their evacuation. But the people who did contact me have shared a set of experiences which have enriched my understanding of what life was like in the Creuse for those petits parisiens who came during 1943 and 1944 to escape the increasingly heavy air raids and food shortages in Paris. The Creuse was just one of several areas to

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which these children were sent. However, my research led me to the Creuse as the first department to volunteer in 1943, and the one which took a large number of children from Boulogne-Billancourt, a town I had previously studied in my book *French Children Under the Allied Bombs, 1940-45: An Oral History* (Manchester University Press, 2016).

I met with as many people as I could. I have recorded the stories of around 20 people in relation to child evacuation. Not all were those I expected to speak to. They fit into four broad categories. I am not using surnames in this piece. In what follows, I will bring together the voices of about twenty people.

First, there are the direct interviews with former evacuees. Roger (b. 1933), Christian (b. 1937) and Jacques K (b. 1932): three boys who left the Paris suburbs on the evacuation convoys and spent happy times in the Creuse with foster families. I interviewed all three men in their second homes in the Creuse (or the neighbouring Puy-de-Dôme for Jacques K) in Roger’s case alongside his creusois friend Marcel (b. 1939), who remembered the evacuee children coming. Across what follows, their stories provide a driving thread. Two further accounts from former evacuees came from Huguette (b. 1937) and Yvette (b. 1937), who were unavailable during my trip, but sent me written memories.

Second, I gathered the story of former evacuees by indirect means. I was contacted by Yolande about her mother Simone (b. 1935), who arrived on a convoy of evacuees in May 1944. The interview took place just across the road from where Simone was billeted, with Yolande and Simone’s widower Eugène. While the interview did not give me direct access into Simone’s world, it gave me the interpretations of the impact of these experiences on others. Recreating multiple perspectives on the past acknowledges the multiple ownerships of past events, their memories and their reverberations down the years. Simone’s story was at the heart of the family’s existence, and recounting it gave pleasure to daughter and husband, as well as provoking some tears.

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2 The other departments assigned were to the Paris region by the German military authorities, via the Ministry of the Interior (Refugees department) were Haute-Saône, Yonne, Allier, Saône-et-Loire, Doubs and Jura (Archives municipales de Boulogne-Billancourt (AMBB), 6H18: Prefect of the Seine to Mayors of the Seine, Planned evacuation measures, 15 April 1943).

3 All interviews used in this paper were conducted between 16 June 2017 and 13 July 2017, by L. Dodd.

4 Huguette L, “Enfant réfugiée à Bourganeuf”, sent to L. Dodd, 10 June 2017.

The third category are at once indirect and direct witnesses: children from foster families. I interviewed Françoise (b. 1937), whose family had taken in the evacuee girl Marcelle (b. 1931); and also to lifelong neighbours Marie (b. 1927) and Geneviève (b. 1936), whose families hosted sisters from Boulogne-Billancourt, Georgette (b. 1933) and Giselle (b. 1931). I interviewed the two women together in the house where Georgette had been welcomed around the kitchen table, along with Marie’s daughter-in-law, whose paternal and maternal grandparents also took in evacuees, and in the presence of Marie’s granddaughter, and another neighbour. A further interview with Jean-Pierre (see below) and his creusois neighbours husband and wife Denis and Jeannine (b. 1938); the latter also recounted memories of her family’s evacuee girl Madeleine. I also received another written account from Alice, whose husband’s family took in a little boy called Paul.6

Finally, I have conducted several interviews with people linked more indirectly to the topic: in Paris, I interviewed Jacques P (b. 1938), who believes he was evacuated from Paris to the Creuse in 1940 or 1941, and Jean-Pierre (b. 1936) who arrived from Normandy in the Creuse in 1940 during the civilian exodus and was taken in by Denis’s (b. 1931) family. Henri (b. 1934) arrived in the Creuse in 1940 with his family, fleeing the war. (His experiences are not included in what follows.) André and Michel (both b. 1933) are cousins, whom I interviewed together, both of whom were sent to live with their aunt in the Creuse; twin boy evacuees from Boulogne-Billancourt, René and Daniel (b. 1932) joined them on the aunt’s farm, forming a group of five or six children under her care. In Paris, I also interviewed Léa (b. 1934), who, like Henri and Jean-Pierre, arrived as a refugee with her mother and sister in 1940; they stayed a few months, and she believes she returned again in 1944. Finally, Serge (b. 1934), a Jewish boy whose family were sheltered in the Creuse, and Jean (b. 1923) who, as a newly qualified young instituteur,

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6 Account sent to L. Dodd, 20 June 2017.
accompanied a convoy of Parisian evacuees to the Haute-Saône (Serge’s and Jean’s accounts are not included in what follows).

Various others wrote to me with information about relatives and friends, clearly interested in the topic. Yet this aspect of wartime France is neglected in the history books: attention understandably falls on the activities of the Resistance, the German occupation, the Vichy regime’s reforms and collaboration, and its anti-Semitic persecution, as well as the Liberation. Less attention has been given to everyday experiences, particularly those of children. Although my research deals with a small group of individuals, there is no reason to assume that they are especially unusual; and their stories illuminate aspects of this period which changed lives in unexpected ways.

2. Before evacuation

I wanted to know about the children’s lives in the Paris region before they were evacuated. Wartime archives and medical records show that urban children’s health had deteriorated by 1943, and documents relating to evacuation dwell extensively on children’s return to better health in the countryside. As is often the case, the archival records have a particular kind of bias: we learn of serious problems and great successes, but not the mundanities of the everyday. The interviews showed the reality as less dichotomous than a dangerous, starving city and a safe, contented countryside. Yet there are indications that life was, in most cases, more dangerous, more restricted, and more hungry in Paris. Moreover, the violence of war was by no means absent from the Creuse; and, indeed, while food was more plentiful, life in rural France was far from easy.

Bombs and particularly the disruptive air raid alerts were part of the fabric of everyday life in the capital. Jacques K said:

> I remember really well, we had our gas masks. We went to school with our gas masks. They were in a tube – as round as that and as long as that – it was dark grey, and the gas mask was inside. So we had our satchel and our gas mask. And then there were the air raid practices we did at school too.

Even without the bombs, the masks and the air raid drills kept in mind the possibility of what could happen. Roger recalled the hidden perks to what might otherwise have been rather frightening:

> It was regular, on Tuesdays, regular – at the very moment when we started French dictation, the alarm sounded – so off to the shelter! Roger, well, he makes the sign of the cross and says ‘Thank you, Lord! You’re not going to have eighteen faults in your work this time!’

For Christian, younger, the memories are less clear: an image of a group of children clustered around a bomb-hole full of water, and nights disrupted by alerts:

> I had to go to bed, to sleep with my parents because – , I remember it very well, they had a big double bed, and they came to get me, and I was in the middle of this big bed, there must’ve
been my father on one side and my mother on the other – , not every night, but very often there were air raid alerts, so they always had to be ready to quickly […] grab the child and run down to the cellar.

These kinds of impressions suggest strong visual memories tied into emotions: Christian’s surprise at the sight of the bomb-hole, and feelings of the tension around alerts.

Air raids were not the only evidence of war in the children’s lives. Fathers in particular were separated from families during the invasion of 1940. Roger’s and Christian’s fathers were taken prisoner of war, and Jacques P’s father was killed. Many children took part in the *exode* of 1940. This civilian exodus of 1940 brought Jean-Pierre to the Creuse; I have not included much of his story here as he was a temporary refugee rather than one of the later evacuees; it was, nonetheless, an experience that marked him for life. Once France was defeated, Germans appeared on the streets of Paris. Roger recalled a striking memory of the supposedly terrifying occupier:

Two kids, they can’ve only been about twenty, they were walking down Avenue Reille, with a paper cornet of grapes in their hands, like that – , they were laughing and eating the grapes.

From his perspective now, he recognised the German men as youthful and, if not innocent, certainly not fearsome warriors. He also sought to emphasise that, for him (and in contrast to how the era is usually portrayed), this period of war was not all doom and gloom; far from it:

I lived all of that like the longest playtime! Until 1943, I didn’t have any father to discipline me, as he was a prisoner of war. There was only my Mum, trying to get by and earn a living.

Roger made clear that ‘for a child who doesn’t know what war is, it’s pure freedom’. He knew that this was not the experience of all children; but it shows not only an unusual dimension of war and occupation, but also a sense of childish ignorance, freedom and stability – despite his father’s absence – which was followed by a warm welcome in the Creuse.

Such a positive view of a child in wartime is not unusual amongst people I interviewed here, and for my previous bombing research. Roger described difficult moments, but by and large he was well looked after across this period and experienced these years as a time of growth and learning; he was never in significant danger, nor traumatised by violence or threat. Things were different for others. Among the evacuees considered here, Simone had a difficult time before her evacuation. Her daughter Yolande and widower Eugène described with great emotion her life in the suburbs. There was love and affection, but Simone’s mother lacked the support of a spouse, and struggled to work and look after her three children. After school Simone and her brothers hung around the streets in a district susceptible to air raids. Eugène said:

The air raids, the bombs, all of that, well, all in her head, it was awful. You could say she was traumatised practically all of her life because of that, oh, yes, yes, yes.

He had seen the impact of this trauma across his wife’s life. He continued:
When the bombs stopped falling, she’d go with all the little kids from the neighbourhood, and collect the shards of bombs and shrapnel, to sell them to the rag-and-bone man, to get some money for food, you see.

Some children collected shrapnel to show it off the next day in class; but it had a different value for Simone. Her encounters with the Germans were also coloured by need: ‘sometimes there was a German who’d come, who’d give them bread. She told me “I ate bread given to me by a German”.’ Yolande summarised her mother’s life as a little girl:

It was poverty, and sad too, because she was a little girl and she was living in fear. She told me, after school, the children were left to look after themselves. They lived in the streets, and because her brothers were older then her, she said what they used to do was ‘they took me to the cinema, and just left me there – ’, they left her, and she said ‘I used to see films which scared me, which frightened me’ […] She was just left to herself. Always in fear, anxiety.

A trip to the cinema, a treat for other children, here added to her nervous state. The little girl who arrived in the Creuse in 1944 was understandably in a different condition to Roger; her adaptation to the new circumstances was evidently affected by what she had lived through.

For whatever reason, Roger had no memory of hunger. But Jacques K did: he said that ‘there was nothing to eat’, and mimed dabbing at the table with his thumb to pick up the tiniest crumbs of bread: ‘that’, he said emphatically of this gesture, ‘that has stayed with me’. Jacques K also remarked on a further discomfort: the cold. He said ‘we had chilblains, here, and there, and on our feet’; while the children were not ill, he said, they were not in peak condition. In the family’s apartment, ‘it froze on the inside […] there was ice on the windows’. When it was cold, the whole family lived in one room of their HLM; and like Roger, whose flat was on the sixth floor, and Christian, whose large family also squeezed into a small apartment, the lack of physical space would provide a striking contrast with their later rural lives.

3. Arrival in the Creuse

The evacuee children mostly arrived in the Creuse by train: special services were commissioned, and convoys of several hundred children accompanied by primary school teachers left the Gare d’Austerlitz in Paris, trundling slowly southwards. Yvette recounted her memory of her and her brother sticking their heads out of the train window, marveling at the fields as they rolled by, and oblivious to the smuts flying from the locomotive and dirtying their faces. Christian recalled:

I can remember being at the Town Hall in Colombes, and there, my parents – or at least my mother – had taken me there, and I had to get a coach or some kind of transport. My mum had
made me a big bag using an old mattress cover – you know, those mattress covers you used to get, with stripes –, and she’d packed my things inside it.

The contents of these ‘trousseaux’ were stipulated by the sending municipalities, although the archives show that many children arrived without everything they needed. Christian had a memory of the train journey too:

I was really little, and the big boys, I must have been annoying them a bit in our compartment, and so got hold of me and – in those days, there was a sort of hammock up above, where you put the luggage – and they put me up there, and so I slept, I just slept.

For Roger too, this journey left a trace, and he emphasised the excitement:

Well, it was the holidays! […] When I left, there was lots of noise, my mates –, I loved my parents, though, of course! But – […] I’d not shed a tear for the whole journey [acting the sad child], ‘Oh, Mum, Oh Dad, I won’t see you again!’ No, no! I was going on an adventure!

Again, Roger sees his own ignorance acting as a barrier to fear and concern. Christian and Roger both remembered time spent in a large building in Guéret – probably the school at Grancher. Christian was given something to eat in a large canteen, and Roger’s convoy stayed there overnight: it was only in the morning that the distribution of the children began. And here, things took a different turn: ‘I started to cry when I arrived really in the village. Ah, that was it, the adventure – but now, it’s not funny anymore’, he said.

Jacques K did not recall much of the journey, but said that

In Guéret there were coaches waiting for us, which dispatched us across the whole of the Creuse, you could put it like that. And we found ourselves in this village here, in Dontreix.

Christian too recalled coaches ‘dispatching’ the children to different places, his own to Issoudun-Létrieix. For Roger, a chance meeting after their overnight stay at Grancher got he and his friends onto the coach for Saint-Priest-la-Feuille. All mentioned being examined and selected by local people: not a particularly pleasant process. Jacques K told me that when they arrived at about four o’clock, the local people were already waiting. He re-enacted the scene:

‘So how many d’you want?’ Like that. Well, we were just there, like sheep. ‘You want a little boy or a little girl? What d’you want? And the peasants: ‘For me, well, you could look after my sheep’; ‘Me, I need one for the cows.’

Yvette and her brother Maurice were led away by two women from the same hamlet; they were summarily dunked in the river on the way to their new homes: ‘It was shameful for them to arrive back in the village with two children whose faces were black with coal. I was a bit scared as it seemed like there was a lot of water.’ Jacques K found himself in a difficult position as his parents had told him: ‘Above all: don’t leave your little sister –, always stay with your little sister.’ He felt this responsibility keenly. Likewise, Roger wanted to hold onto those who were familiar to him. As the children tucked
into a good lunch of veal and potatoes, the local people circled, picking out those they wanted. He recounted:

I’m not sure how they went about it, the distribution – if someone was managing it, or if there was a lady who said, ‘Well, I’d like a girl, myself’, ‘Oh, well I want a boy’, but this all started, and in the middle of it, I heard ‘Oh well, me, I’d really like that one over there – are you free?’

He watched as his companions were taken and made up his mind not to be left alone: when a man approached him, Roger replied that he needed to stay with his cousin – a boy who was not in fact his cousin, but a neighbour. The man could not take two. Another man – ‘a great beanstalk with a bushy moustache’ – announced forcefully that he wanted ‘a big lad! Good and strong! Who’ll help me out!’: Roger buried himself in his veal. But when a young woman came up to him, accompanied by a young man – he took them for a couple – and asked kindly ‘D’you want to come with us?’ he took the chance eagerly: ‘Oh, yes, yes please, I’d like that.’ As they left, his tears began: into the unknown. Arriving in the village, an old woman passed by, remarking:

‘Isn’t he brave, the little lad!’ Roger was surprised: ‘In my head, even through my tears, I thought “how stupid she is to think I’m brave! I’m crying! I’m crying like a baby!”’ He was not yet to know that in the patois (dialect) of the Creuse, brave meant bien, that is, good, and he was on his way to being accepted by the villagers.

Sturdy boys were one thing; but neither five-year-old Christian or nine-year-old Simone looked likely to be of much use. It was expected that evacuee children would lend a hand according to their age and ability, as long as they attended school normally. But how much use could a five-year-old be? Christian described the scene:

You have to imagine all these people, with all these children, all discussing which child they’d take – , it must have taken – , it must have been a long time […] And next to me, my bundle of course, sitting there with my bundle – , and of course, no-one was interested in me. Which made complete sense, in fact, you know. On a farm, children have to be useful. You can’t be a dead-weight. And me, I was a dead-weight.

A woman brought a slice of bread and jam to the exhausted little boy. He said

Obviously, people took the sturdier children at first, to work in the fields and things […] So I was the last one left.

Luckily for Christian, the village mayor had let others choose first. Not keen to take the boy himself, his wife intervened, admonishing him: ‘You’re not going to let this child go back to the bombs!’ And thus Christian found himself in the mayor’s home, where he was welcomed and loved.

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Figure 12: Saint-Dizier-Leyrennes (Creuse). Jacques P was evacuated to this village. Source: L. Dodd (2017)

7 The archives reveal that some children were definitely exploited, and there were complaints about people making use of ‘Parisien servants’, who were unpaid – and, indeed, the host families received a daily allowance for. None of the people I interviewed shared this experience.
Simone was also unwanted at first. Small and scared, a label strung around her neck, she watched her brothers being selected. She was the last child left. Her widower Eugène recounted these events, which still pained him: the coach driver called out

‘D’you know anyone who’ll take this little girl?’ She was only nine, and little, you know, and he said ‘Does anyone know someone who’ll take her in, otherwise I’m taking her back?’ Nobody wanted her.

Simone’s daughter Yolande explained that they had not been sure whether this skinny, short-haired child in a sailor suit was a boy or a girl, so they looked in her underwear: a powerful and degrading humiliation. But Simone did not go back. Lucienne, an unmarried woman in her forties, living with her mother in the village of Saint-Marc-à-Loubaud, stepped forward saying: ‘I’ll take that little girl, all alone in the square there.’ Thus Simone found a home with Lucienne, and not just for a few months. She was never formally adopted, but her family reached an arrangement for her to stay after the end of the war. Her relationship with Lucienne was not straightforward, but her environment was stable and calm.

Here, we can start drawing on the perspectives of the host families. Jeannine’s parents were horrified that a little girl might be billeted with two old bachelors and stepped in to take her. The girl’s sister went to their neighbour, and her cousins were not far away. Jeannine’s father swung little Madeleine onto his shoulders, among the cherry blossoms to quieten her tears; as soon as they spoke to her in their strange but friendly patois, she burst into laughter; things began to look up. Neither Marie nor Françoise knew how the selection process took place. All Marie recalled was that ‘a few days after [Georgette] arrived, everyone had got nits’: not an uncommon experience. It appears that Françoise’s mother had been unable to choose the child she wanted. She said: ‘My Mum was a bit annoyed because she’d asked for a little girl, of around my age’ – in their small, overcrowded house, an adolescent girl was harder to accommodate than a six-year-old. The other surprise for little Françoise was that this young girl looked so different – for Marcelle was half Indochinese: in rural France, such ethnic different was rare. The range of surnames among the fiches d’évacuation of the thousands of urban children were evacuated testify to the large immigrant population in cosmopolitan Paris, particularly in the working-class suburbs. Such families had no access rural family networks who might take in relatives’ children.

4. Country life

The petits parisiens took stock of their new surroundings. There were so many of them, it seemed to locals: Geneviève commented that ‘they were everywhere’, and her school was overflowing. Her neighbour Marie agreed: ‘they were in every village.’ Her daughter-in-law, present at the interview, remarked that both her maternal and paternal grandparents took in a child. What were the evacuees’ first impressions? Jacques K described the long walk to the village: ‘I really remember, the smell of the

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*Fiches d’évacuation* located at Archives départementales de la Creuse, 288W 44-57.
Christian had a different kind of journey. He said:

They took me down to the farm in a carriage, with a horse – a mare –, and I arrived at this big house –, well, obviously, when you come from a low-rent flat in the city and you find yourself on one of the big farms like they have round here –, it’s like a castle!

Roger recalled a strangely dressed woman – it was Marie, would grow to care so much for him:

She was at the boiler, and when she came out of the door, you see, there was the door of the boiler, and you can just see the back of it, all black, and then you see a woman coming out, all in black, with a hat –, like that –, I don’t know what she said to me, but we went back into the house. She probably said I was beau as well –, well, it certainly was a sight!

Perhaps the tears started again, he could not remember – but it was all too strange and overwhelming. Evacuee Huguette also retained powerful visual memories of that first meeting: she was taken to a dental practice, where she saw:

a small woman, with black hair and brown eyes, wearing a white blouse. What struck me the most was the bright red colour of her lipstick. They left me in a long corridor, where there was a waxed wooden staircase, going up to the waiting room. The woman with brown eyes said to me ‘A man’s just coming in. Give him a kiss and call him Daddy’. And then I saw a man arrive, not very tall, dressed in a sheepskin coat and wearing a beret. […] I threw my arms around his neck and said ‘Hello, Daddy’, like I’d been told.

Huguette was cherished by this childless couple, and once the war was over, adopted by them. Her memories reflect the affection and care she received.

Children found themselves in all sorts of accommodation. Those who were ill, too naughty or were serial bedwetters remained in collective centres such as the one at Grancher. Some children went to villages or isolated hamlets; some, like Huguette, went to more middle-class families in small towns. However, the archives suggest a widespread complaint: that the wealthier citizens of the Creuse had not volunteered. Huguette noted that her foster parents refused the daily fifteen francs allocated by the state per evacuee; the archives also show that some foster parents placed this money into savings accounts for the evacuees. But mostly, the fifteen francs provided a valuable addition to household incomes which were small; most people were smallholders living a kind of autarchy; the shortages of war, however, did not pass them by. Jacques K remembered that his foster family welcomed the nails his own parents brought when they visited, exchanging them for farm produce.

Françoise described her family’s village house: a low, two-roomed, single-storey dwelling. Her father worked for the post office. In one room were the table, chairs, cooking range, a sideboard, and the children’s beds. The other room served as a dining room, with table and chairs, cupboard, as well as her parents’ bed, with a large wardrobe. In these multi-functional rooms lived Françoise’s parents, their
three children, a young uncle of hers fleeing the Service de Travail Obligatoire (the forced labour draft), a female cousin sent from Paris, and Marcelle the evacuee. This well-ordered but busy rural home may not have been what she was used to. In the archives, there is evidence that urban parents from Paris did not always appreciate the conditions their children were living in, conditions which were relatively normal by rural standards.

Many of the evacuees had shared rooms and beds with siblings at home. Sleeping arrangements in the countryside were new. Roger remarked that today, some of these arrangements would not be viewed as appropriate. On the day he arrived, he was so upset that he would not go upstairs to bed. Marie said ‘Well, do you want to sleep with Raymond?’ her grown-up son. Roger agreed that this was less scary, and there he stayed. Cousins André and Michel shared an upstairs room at their aunt’s house, where they were joined by the evacuee twins from Boulogne-Billancourt, René and Daniel – whose bedwetting proved something of a problem for the family’s maid. The upstairs of the farmhouse where Jacques K was staying was not really used. Everyone slept downstairs, where there was a ‘great big fireplace’; he said the rooms had beaten earth floors, on which ferns were strewn, and he slept in a ‘boat bed’ under a homemade eiderdown. At first, five-year-old Christian shared a bed with the farmers’ son Georges, just a little older than him. Later he had his own room. Thinking of his family’s flat in Paris, he said

There was absolutely no comparison! Down there, you had the house, which was where people lived, with the range, that was the place where we always were, like on all the farms –, and when you opened the door, there were hens, ducks, pigs –, everything! Horses –, and then upstairs, there were the bedrooms –, enough bedrooms for everyone!

The mayor’s house, a prosperous working farm, was large and, probably like that of Geneviève’s family, busy. She said that they were often twelve people sitting down to a meal, the farmhands joining the family; sociability was different in the country to the town, and neighbours spent a lot of time in each others’ company. Christian was welcomed widely; he said ‘everyone there in the village called me Cri-Cri –, always that nickname’. The village of Saint-Marc-à-Louboud also took Simone to its heart: her daughter Yolande remarked that her mother ‘was adopted, emotionally, by everyone […] This little girl, she had good friends, she was –, she had really good friends and everyone here loved her’.

When I invited people to talk to me about their experiences in the Creuse, I expected to hear from those who had a good time; I also expected I might hear from those who did not. Certainly, the archives contain evidence of unpleasant experiences. But overwhelmingly in these interviews, I learnt of powerful bonds forming between the children and their foster families. These bonds were parental and filial. Christian was baptised during his evacuation, the couple who took him in becoming his godmother and godfather: ‘I became indirectly part of the family after that, you see’; Georges, their son, was a big brother to him. The twins René and Daniel from Boulogne-Billancourt were also baptised while in the...
Creuse – but without the approval of their Communist mother! Jeannine said that although her sister was about the same age as their evacuee Madeleine, it was she who formed the sisterly bond with the little Parisian, with whom she shared an adventurous streak. In Marie’s household, her older teenage sister really took to their evacuee Georgette: ‘she was a little bit like a daughter to her. Oh, yes, my sister, she went everywhere with her.’ Alice described her husband’s family’s evacuee Paul in strong familial terms: ‘for him, my husband was his brother and my sister-in-law was his sister, and in fact, Paul called my father-in-law Dad and the grandmother Grandmother.’ Huguette called the dentist and her husband ‘my parents’; she said ‘I call them that because they deserve it.’

Jacques P was very young when he was evacuated and his memories are vague, if happy. He said wonderingly, ‘I must have called them Mum and Dad’. Geneviève also spoke of their evacuee girl Giselle (sister of Georgette, billeted with her neighbour Marie) who in adulthood referred to Geneviève’s mother as her ‘second Mum’; and Roger said of Marie, ‘I was her son’. It was only indirectly that I learnt about cases where strong bonds were less evident. For example, neither Marcelle or Georgette maintained much contact after the war, although Françoise recalled Marcelle visiting them some years later, and sending condolences on her mother’s death. One of the reasons why André and Michel had contacted me was in the hope that I might help them trace the twins René and Daniel, with whom they had lost touch. André sadly informed me some weeks after the interview that he indeed tracked them down, but both were now deceased. In Simone’s case, she was deeply grateful for the care offered by Lucienne, going beyond the war years. Yolande, Simone’s daughter, remarked that she – Yolande – had a very loving grandmother in Lucienne, although Lucienne’s and Simone’s relationship was never that of mother and daughter.

Life in the countryside had a new rhythm. There was something strange, even exotic, about these people. Jacques K noted that ‘the woman, La Philomène, she was always dressed in the old style: long dark dress, apron over the top. Roger elaborated

They were dressed how people dressed at that time […] The women all wore their little hats, and the men, they had their caps pulled down over their eyes, all greasy round the front.

All of Jacques P’s memories of the Creuse were striking sensory images, including one of his foster mother’s mother:

I remember this lady, because she was dressed as peasant women of the time dressed, in big dark clothes, and I’ve still got a memory of this woman, because she was taking snuff.

This black-clad sniff-taking old lady lodged in his memory. Both Jacques K and Roger remarked on the patois spoken: neither understood at first, and both now manage well – Roger even commented that he corrects his creusois friends when they ‘Frenchify’ their patois.
Furthermore, rural life was lived in relation to the land and its non-human inhabitants. Chief among the ‘chores’ these boys undertook was watching the cows: a ‘chore’ which was clearly a pleasure to recall. Trailing the animals along flowery-verged lanes to their pastures, watching them graze, usually with friends – and later in life, with female friends particularly – keeping an eye out for escapees: being trusted with the responsibility of these valuable beasts, and enjoying the freedom of the open spaces was new and striking. This freedom was bound up, in Roger’s talk, with the clean rural environment: a place and time when everything was organic, and one could suck the fresh water right out of the spring. Roger soon outdid the local boys with his knowledge and daring; his friend Marcel recounted an often-told tale: Roger, ‘he bunged the stream where the water came in, and then in the pool beyond it, there were these little tiddlers, and we caught the tiddlers, and what, well, Roger again, he cooked them, right there and then – !’ Roger added that the fish were tiny ‘but they were our fish, that we’d caught, by ourselves!’ In the countryside, even a small boy like Christian was both free to run and to walk the lanes with his dog, but also in service to the rhythms of the land. For Christian, the sociability of looking after the cows ‘was really very pleasant, because at the same time, the neighbours were there, we’d chat, the dogs were there’. Dogs too, he said, were happy and obedient because they lived freely. Roger had two much-loved dogs, and took on a pet lamb. Even at six years old, Yvette had her own jobs to do: shutting up the hens and chicks at night to keep them from predators. She recalls caring for sickly chicks in a cotton-lined box, next to the range, and adopting a stray kitten which was usually quiet: the kitten lasted only a few days and was buried along with the chicks. Refugee Léa was also only six years old; she had a clear memory of a frightened young pig trying to escape his own castration: she said, ‘I know that there was one who escaped and was really aggressive, and Mum, she was really, really frightened and made us go inside’. This incident brought to her mind that she recalled more pigs than cows in the hamlet where they were staying.

Giselle, however, struggled to accept the hard knocks of country life. When the unwanted puppies of the farm dog were taken to be drowned, she managed to hide one: ‘she was cunning’, Geneviève commented. Christian said that ‘we really lived in osmosis with the animals’; for him, separation from his furry companions caused great sorrow when he left the Creuse. Of course, not everything was as pleasant as watching the cows. Michel remembered that the schoolday was wedged between farm chores: ‘before leaving, we used to clean the cowshed, then we’d go to school, and in the evening we had to cut up the vegetables for the lambs’, he said. Christian recounted fetching water from the well, collecting nettles and potatoes for pigswill, milling flour; Léa too recalled the pigswill, laughing that her curiosity led her to where it stewed: ‘I tasted it ! I used to taste it, like that, because I really liked it! Not the potatoes, but the wheat!’ For Jacques K, it was the geese who needed attention: ‘When we got home from school in the evening, in winter, with my sister, we had to cut up the beets, the beets for the geese […] It was so cold!’ Afterwards, they pulled off their clogs, toasting their feet on the oven, while Philomène sat knitting socks, her iron needles clacking.
Archival documents attest to the evacuees’ need for clothing; yet the interviewees did not recall noticing a problem – perhaps thanks to efforts such as Philomène’s. Françoise remarked that their clothes were of very poor quality. We had terrible shoes, just wooden clogs. Oh, they hurt your feet – ! We unstitched our clothes to remake them, we unraveled woollens to reknit them! Oh, we weren’t very elegant, I can tell you!

She continued, ‘we didn’t care anyway!’ Michel and André laughed off the discomfort of walking in clogs stuffed with straw. Alice noted, however, that the evacuee boy Paul arrived without many clothes, and was made shirts out of parachute material. Yvette recalled the heavy labour of wash day. Only Simone had something of a clothing problem. Her foster mother Lucienne’s resources were limited, and she looked with a touch of envy at her friends’ nicer garments, feeling her difference acutely. Wooden clogs were a staple of country life, and were commonly mentioned. For Jacques P, these were part of that dream-like rural world where he had been so happy: ‘I went to school in clogs, you know. At the time we went in clogs, there weren’t any shoes, we went in clogs.’

On the whole, though, clothes were less vivid memory than food. I asked Marie whether she thought that the evacuees had a good time in the Creuse; her positive response came down to food: ‘Well, yes I think so. Because they had enough to eat. In fact, they had very good food.’ Christian and Roger described a cornucopia of farm produce: such a contrast with what went before – and came after. Of his arrival, Roger said:

I have a lovely memory, it’s of coming here, of eating white bread with crème fraiche and with lard; it’s good, lard spread on bread, you know!

He described the first supper Marie made for him:

It was a bowl of milk – organic milk from the Limousin cows […] and then there was bread, and there was even Banania for me! I have no idea where Marie got that Banania out from, but I had my little spoonful of Banania in my milk.

Not only did he emphasise the freshness and quality of the milk, but the special treat offered by this kindly woman. Christian too was well fed on a productive and generous farm. He had no memories of wartime hunger:

We had good fromage blanc, with cream, and sugar, and even jam on top. They made cakes, apple tarts – that was the cake we always had there – and lovely chicken with good mashed potatoes, with buttery sauce, and everything.

Jacques K said that they ate all that the earth could provide; they only lacked man-made products. For Michel, the memorable food he and he cousin André were provided with was ‘pancakes, with honey, things like that. There was blueberry jam’, he continued. However, homemade fresh bread stood above everything else as the stuff of life. Alice remarked of the evacuee boy Paul, who was in poor condition when he turned up in her future husband’s family:
When Paul arrived, the family had just made bread, and Paul, he came from Billancourt and he was starving. He said to himself ‘I’ve fallen on my feet here, it must be a bakery, I’m going to be able to eat.’ He ate more than he should have done and made himself ill. He was sick in the night.

One of the most powerful interviews I conducted was with Jean-Pierre; he was not an evacuee who arrived on the 1943/44 convoys, but a refugee whose mother and her two young sons found themselves in the Creuse during the civilian exodus of 1940. Bread was at the heart of the story, and moved Jean-Pierre to tears as he described the spontaneity of the welcome this desperate family received:

This is why those first days are so important. They saved our lives! […] There was fresh bread. It’s just been cooked. I’m hungry. It’s fresh bread. It’s extraordinary – my whole life!’

His deep gratitude to Denis’s family, who fed and housed them, and got his father released from the French army, extended outwards to embrace the Creuse itself.

I wondered whether festival days were celebrated differently in the countryside – perhaps Christmas or Easter; it was the case, Roger said, that ‘it meant that you might eat a little bit better’, perhaps with meat from the butcher rather than the farm. But he remarked that as the Creuse was rather de-christianised, these festivals counted for less than ‘the real festival, the threshing’. Harvest time was at the heart of the rural year. Jacques P told me

I remember, once a year, we went – there was the threshing. And so everyone went to help with the threshing, it was the biggest festival at the time.

Families and villages pooled their labour to help each other, and the steam-powered combine-harvester did the rounds; boasts about the strength of one pair of bullocks over another gave rise to competitions and taunting jibes between neighbours. Jacques P remembered collecting up the fallen ears of wheat, the growing haystacks, the bullocks and the bullocks doing the heavy work; for Roger, who was older and who returned to the Creuse year after year, harvest was a moment of sheer delight. He described the festive atmosphere:

a party, there was always a big party, because there were so many people, there was so much work to do, and because there were so many people, there were so many people to feed too.

On a big farm, a calf would be killed to feed everyone. There were different kinds of meat, unheard of for the rest of the year, dish after dish prepared by the women to feed the workers from the fields, neighbours and relatives; afterwards, Marcel added, there was singing and dancing. This was a singular moment of sociability, an old custom, hard work giving way to celebration and release.
The undulating and rugged Creuse countryside was very evident to me as I drove to my interviews. Without cars and tarmacked roads, distances must have been greater. When Michel broke his arm on his aunt’s farm near to Faux-la-Montagne, getting help was a problem: it took some time for the doctor to be summoned and then to arrive: ‘then the doctor came, and we had to get a taxi with him, they found a gazogène [a wood-fired vehicle], which took two hours and a half to get me to the hospital in Bourganeuf, so it took four hours, me with my arm broken, like that’, he said. Marie remarked that ‘we pedaled hard’: at the time, bicycles played a vital role in rural communications. Her neighbour Geneviève said: ‘We didn’t really go out like people do today. We were quite enclosed in our houses, and in the fields around them.’ Life was, in many respects, sheltered – but not isolated. In the winter when darkness fell early and outdoors tasks became impossible, the veillée – evening gatherings of friends and neighbours – were a staple, and central to memories of the time. Françoise said that their two-room house was even fuller in the evenings: ‘women knitting things, men making things, talking, playing cards.’ Children participated in the activities of the veillée; Jacques K and his siblings were taught to weave baskets by the elders. Christian too described the scene

The oldest ones were making baskets, baskets out of reeds. There, the youngest ones around the table playing cards, belote – , and then, there was the fire, it was winter. We’d put little bits of cheese on strips of wood, like that, and melt them in the fire, and then eat the cheese, like that.

Yvette too recounted the sounds of what she called ‘unforgettable evenings’:

Short days and long nights. Evening veillées, going to each other’s houses, in front of the hearth where the fire crackled, fed with enormous logs. The crackling fire accompanied the chatter of the women, whose knitting grew with the clicking of their needles, from time to time interrupted by the ‘dix de der’ of the belote players, and sound of the dice the children were rolling, the one, two three taps on the Ludo board, and not forgetting the dominoes.

Marcel emphasised the role these gatherings played in rural communications: ‘In those days’, he said, ‘the Internet already existed: it was the veillée’. And for the children who listened in to the adults’ chat, it was a window into another world. ‘Well, we heard them talking about – , between adults, but we listened in all the same, around the fire’: arrests, violence, resistance activity, ‘Oh, well – kids, we were – , we said “Oh my, so-and-so has gone and done that!’ With the veillée in the winter and communal work in the fields, meetings in the lanes, life was not as isolated as perhaps appeared.

5. School

For children, school was the locus for integration into a community of peers. The evacuees attended village schools, walking significant distances to get there: Roger remarked that he did four kilometres there, and four back. About nine children left from his hamlet, picking up more en route, until a gang
of twenty arrived together. These journeys live in memory as moments of joyful freedom and high jinks – sliding along icy lanes in winter, hunting for birds’ eggs in spring, and dabbling in the streams as the weather warmed up. Jacques K recalled blackberrying on the road, but also commented on the difficulties of negotiating icy and rutted lanes in clogs. Archival evidence tells us that some evacuee children’s lack of suitable footwear kept them away from school in winter.

For most of the children, going home for lunch was impossible. André and Michel did while the weather was good, having a pancake and a bowl of soup with their aunt. Michel’s little sister was too young to do the four-kilometre lunchtime round trip, though, so stayed in the village with others who could not get back, eating in a restaurant there. Most lunch policies involved children taking with them what their families could spare – unlike in the towns, they did not want for a good lunch: ‘we ate well’, said Roger appreciatively. Jacques K recounted:

When we arrived, the first thing we did, some of us peeled the vegetables, others chopped the wood to put in the stove, to make the fire [...] , and oh, it smelled good! Because across the whole morning, there was this – , the soup, in a thing as big as that, and there it was, it really smelled so good!

By pooling resources, no child suffered from short rations. Yvette and her friend Monique recount going every day for lunch at the house of an old lady in the village: ‘She’d heat all of us children’s dishes up for us.’ Roger’s school had a vegetable garden – and digging it over was assigned as a punishment. But for some of these urban children, the opportunity to spend more time outdoors just added to the pleasures of country life; both Roger and Christian praised their teachers for taking them into the forests and fields to learn about science and nature; Roger said ‘we were learning without having to learn. We learnt naturally’.

As the evacuee children prepared to return to Paris across the latter part of 1944 and into 1945, the Prefect of the Creuse remarked that the friendship between urban and rural children was now an established fact – and he hoped it would last.9 Christian believes he was the only evacuee in his school; Jacques K said that there were four or five others in his; yet in some districts evacuees put pressure on school resources. This is clear from the archives, and underscored by Geneviève:

it doubled the number of pupils, perhaps more! So they even brought in some old school desks, because there weren’t enough tables – they brought these old desks.

Michel and André also remarked upon the very large class size – perhaps forty-five children – that their teacher had to deal with. Both Jacques K and Roger commented that there was noanimosity between the children. Jacques K felt there was more openness towards strangers in that era than now. Roger said that although there were occasional ‘little disputes’ in the playground – ‘Oh, you Parigots, nah nah nah!’ – there was no discrimination. Jeannine suggested that some parents attempted to separate the children, but the children saw things differently:

I remember that there was one family, they all had nits. So they told us ‘Well, you mustn’t get to close to them’, like – , oh yes indeed. But we played together all the same!

Likewise, it was an adult who tried to isolate Simone:

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It was one thing on top of another, you know, a refugee, poor, headllice […] so there, she was poorly welcomed by the primary school teacher, who always kept her a little bit aside, who seemed to want to marginalise her somewhat.

Geneviève found herself shocked by the new arrivals: a well-behaved little girl from the farm, she now shared her classroom with audacious children who ‘had the gift of the gab. Far more than us. Far more. They were used to being around people’. They answered back, and took punishment without flinching – this, she said, ‘was like chalk and cheese’, compared with the local children. Roger also wondered at how he may have viewed local children:

I must have had some kind of feeling of superiority over the little peasant children. I say that now, it must have been that, because I stopped stammering in class. I could read absolutely anything aloud, it didn’t get stuck.

So while the children mingled and played together, the memory stories hinted at noticeable differences; yet even for poor Simone, who vomited anxiously in the mornings before school yet received the highest mark in her school leaving certificate, friendships formed, often for life.

6. Encounters with war

Although these children had been sent to the countryside for their safety, it did not put them beyond the reach of war. How France experienced war was very much a matter of geography. Urban children, or those from the north, knew of the exodus, of Germans, of bombs; but in the countryside too, there were air raids particularly in 1940, there were Germans after 1942, and many fathers absent as prisoners of war – which meant young lads like Denis had to shoulder extra responsibilities on the farm. Knowledge of the war came via the veillée or the radio – and several recalled listening to ‘Les Français parlent aux Français’ on the BBC – but understanding was limited by age. For example, Françoise understood the demarcation line very literally: ‘for me, as a little girl, the demarcation line, in my head I saw a line drawn on the ground which cut France in two.’

After November 1942, that line mattered less, as the Germans spread into the so-called ‘Free Zone’. Huguette recalls five German soldiers billeted in their house; one was ‘difficult’, but the others were ‘very respectful’ and ‘very kind to me, and even played with me’. Other children had less interaction with Germans – the most visible sign of the ongoing war. Christian remarked that the first German he encountered was a prisoner of war who worked on the farm after the war, with whom he was friendly. Roger, Marcel and Jacques P also remembered these farmworkers, the letters ‘PG’ on their backs. Jacques P had a more frightening memory from 1944: watching from behind the garden gate:

in the street, there were Germans. Machine guns, lorries, and Germans, and I still remember, a child at the gate […] and then there, in the street – , I’ll never forget it […], I remember this German, sitting on the steps of a truck, waxing his boots. Waxing his boots, tall boots, like that, oh, it shined, it gleamed, brush brush brush, and then ‘Get inside! Get inside, it’s the Germans’. But wasn’t fear I felt, it was amazement: ‘Wow! Wow! Wow!’

These impressive troops were thought to be those who had massacred the town of Oradour-sur-Glane, not far away. Yet largely, young children were unaware of the danger they posed. Jeannine remembered:

We had the Germans go by, and we weren’t that far from the road, you know. And just at that moment, Madeleine, she said, we’d climbed up on this little wall, and she said, just like that ‘Look out, it’s the Boches!’ And my mother, I remember she was angry. ‘Don’t say that, don’t say that’. But me, well, I didn’t understand what it meant.
Other events of war, commemorated spectacularly and memorably elsewhere, entered children’s worlds less directly. Of the Liberation, Jacques P commented: ‘There, I don’t have any memories. No memories at all. It’s strange, but I don’t have any memory of it.’ The end of the war had a meaning of its own to eleven-year-old Roger:

For me, the end of the war – it was a half day of bunking off school, but nothing more than that, as if it was just another day. It wasn’t ‘We’ve won! We’ve beaten them! We’re the best!’ No, no no.

The end of a war which had not much encroached on him, but which nonetheless was the catalyst to these rural freedoms, was a paradox which did not trouble him.

War came to rural France in other forms. In 1940, the large villages of Chénérailles and Gouzon were bombed by the Axis powers. Henri, newly arrived with his family, told me about the destruction the attack wrought on Gouzon, itself a refuge from the oncoming Wehrmacht. Thereafter contact with violence was more often a result of resistance activity, or attempts to avoid capture. Françoise recalled her father being spared arrest because of his very blond hair and blue eyes. Escape touched Huguette more closely. Her foster father awaited the Germans, revolver in hand; rounded up for the STO, he managed to escape. She recounted the hunt:

That day there, my father, mother and I hid in a big pipe on my father’s builiding site. We were hiding there, full of fear that the Germans would find us. We heard them passing overhead. How long did we stay hidden there?

Marcel also recalled a raid, at the age of five, as the Vichy police came looking for a wanted man:

And one night – it was often at night that they’d come knocking, to see if he was there or not – my Mum took me down to the cellar, wrapped up in an eiderdown, and she squeezed me so tightly, I thought I was being smothered, suffocating, but she wanted to stop me crying, to stop me saying that he was there.

Jacques K listened carefully to the stories, passed from neighbour to neighbor, about the heroism and the tragedy of local maquis action; the children listened and, he said, took it all in: ‘we learnt those stories almost like our multiplication tables at school, and every day, we talked about those same things.’ Thus they learnt a script that was repeated thereafter. Frightening or exciting, the war was a presence in these children’s lives, all the more so when they sensed their parents’ anxiety: ‘They were scared’, said Geneviève; ‘There was always this worry.’ Françoise, also very young at the time, echoed her thoughts: ‘We knew. We could feel the anxiety. We felt our parents’ anxiety […] They didn’t tell us. But we felt it. We felt it. We lived it too. We were like sponges.’ The war which brought the urban and rural children together advertised its presence in acts experienced and observed, and in emotions felt personally and vicariously.

7. Returning home

It seems a modern-day commonplace to assume that any separation of children from their parents is a negative force and must lead to psychological problems. Psychological research with former child evacuees in Britain in later life indicated the prevalence of mental health problems; but the same research also highlighted that if a child was well looked after before, during and after the evacuation,
experienced neither neglect or abuse, and had not been traumatised beforehand, he or she may well recall evacuation more positively.\textsuperscript{10} Christian fits with these findings:

\begin{figure}[h]
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\caption{Marie (right), her sister and mother, with Georgette (centre). Photo: private collection (undated; 1943 or 1944)}
\end{figure}

the separation from my parents and everything, I don’t really remember that. Because often, I hear people say ‘Can you imagine, for a child –!’ No, you get used to it quickly! Especially if you’re a bit spoilt!

Among the few people interviewed for this project, many memories were positive. Indeed, it is not the separation from biological parents which caused distress, but the separation from foster families. In his case, Jacques K said that the separation at the end of the war was less of a wrench for the children than for the foster parents; he said that Philomène died not long afterwards, making a connection between her death and the loss of the children she had cared for.

Marie told me that her sister, who had cared for Georgette with real affection ‘missed her very much’. Michel said that he was ‘shocked’ by his return to Paris: ‘it was really hard’, he emphasised, particularly given food restrictions which continued after the war. Indeed, his family did not remain long in the capital. Christian too found the return to Paris difficult: ‘there, I found myself in an HLM, on the sixth floor’, sharing a room with his brothers, ‘so I was thinking about the Creuse all the time, about that freedom’. He recalled sitting in his classroom, gazing out of the window:

\begin{displayquote}
I think I was – without knowing it – traumatised by my return from the countryside to town. I really thank it made a mark on me. Now, I’d say yes it did – , when I was younger, I didn’t really pay attention.
\end{displayquote}

Christian’s family recognised the benefit and care given by his now-godparents, and like Roger, he returned year upon year to visit; it was the same for Jacques K and his siblings:

\begin{displayquote}
Us kids, after that, every year we went there for our holidays. Yes, well, we were happy to do that! We’d go every year, every year, every year.
\end{displayquote}

These links were permanent and provided a positive force across all three men’s later lives.

In Yvette’s case, Léonie, the strong, capable woman who had taken her in, said to her one day:

\begin{displayquote}
‘If you have the bad luck to lose your parents, you could come and live with us and when you’re older, you could marry a brayard’ – which meant a peasant boy in the local patois. I was a bit surprised, but the idea didn’t scare me too much.
\end{displayquote}

It seemed this was Léonie’s way of showing Yvette that she really was part of the family. But for the little girl, it was leaving the Creuse which left a sorry memory: ‘Sad day! The moment of separation from this universe into which I’d been entrusted for two years. The emotions leaving this little village, the place where such a friendship grew between Monique and me.’ Leaving was also the moment when, she wrote:

I discovered my father – as my parents came along the road – with a ‘hello, mister’. I hadn’t recognised him. Five years in Germany, my father had been far from my daily life, his visual image erased from my memory.

How many French children also understood this reconfigured family unit in the post-war years? How many fathers, weakened by their time in the Stalags, were greeted with blank faces by their children? How many mothers found themselves sandwiched between broken-hearted husbands and children who wished themselves elsewhere? Many such families, fractured by the war, managed to fix themselves bit by bit – but it took time.

For Jacques P, however, things were difficult in a different way. Jacques’s first memories are of the Creuse. He remembers nothing of his life in Paris beforehand, or of his father, who died in 1940. The Creuse was home. He said:

I came back [to Paris] in August ’47. That, I remember very well, and that moment, when I came back and I found – , my mother – a lady. A lady. Who came to the Creuse, who took me, who said ‘It’s over, we’re going home. I’m your mother’. Fine. Very good. But for me, my mother, it wasn’t her. It was – those people there. Fine. So I went back to Paris […] and there, when I arrived, I saw a man, and she said ‘Right, this will be your father.’ I saw two children: ‘these are your brothers.’ And just like that, tac, it’s over. […] In my child’s mind, I never accepted it. I lived, I went to school, I played with my brothers, but somewhere, somewhere, I always thought of those people there. Always. Always. Always. I always thought of them.

Jacques’s world was turned upside down by the rupture with his foster family. From a land of plenty, where there was always enough to eat, he moved to a Paris where food was still rationed; from being petted by his foster parents, to being the eldest and least favoured of three brothers. At school he spoke with an accent; he said

You land there, and you say to yourself ‘Ah, where am I? Where am I?’ You don’t know anything, you don’t know the town, you don’t know things, you don’t know anything – ah!

Permitted neither to visit his former home, or even to speak of it, the Creuse became a place of ‘happy memories’ in Jacques’s mind, a place of contrast. Conversely, some children were adopted by their creusois hosts, officially or otherwise, such as Simone by Lucienne, or Huguette by the dentist and her husband. Yet these were not straightforward ‘happy endings’ either, creating tensions inside families, and generating problems of identity. There is no standard evacuee experience; but evacuation was likely to be a formative experience, whether positive, negative, or something of both.

8. Legacy in life and memory

What the interviews illustrate with striking clarity is that the experience of evacuation had a deep, long legacy which ran across time. Contemporary archives can tell us nothing about the meaning of the past over time. The interviews showed how evacuation shaped aspects of lives thereafter. It is, of course, possible that those who did not have such a significant evacuation experience would not have chosen to
speak to me. Nonetheless, the former evacuees I spoke to recognised the potency of this moment in their trajectories. Christian commented:

There’s a very, very big transition that you make, when you get hold of a kid of five years old who’s heard the noises of the sirens all night, the ‘whoooo-who00oo’, the air raids, and all of a sudden – the calm here. You see? The freedom, the freedom to run in the fields, the freedom to go.

Roger too emphasised the paradox that, at a time characterised by material, physical and moral restrictions for much of the nation, he said ‘this was a period of freedom like never before’. Those evacuees who had been well looked after recognised the centrality of this freedom to their childhood development.

I was fascinated by the depth of their identification with the Creuse. For Jean-Pierre, the refugee child who arrived during the exode of 1940, he returned years later ‘with an idea to help the Creuse. I wanted to give back to the Creuse’. In various ways across his adult life, he said, ‘I’ve tried to give back to the Creuse’. His efforts were not successful at an institutional level – but he did renew contact with Denis, and purchased a house in the hamlet where, he said, his life was saved by the generosity of strangers. The connections endured across generations. Christian said:

I always wanted to come back. When I got married, I introduced my wife to these people [his godparents], who completely adopted her too, they loved her very much, and after my retirement I said to my godfather, I said to him, ‘you need to find me a house in the Creuse, I’m going to buy a house.’ […] My wife has lived here permanently since 1984. I usually stay in Paris with my son, but I come down here every weekend.

When I asked him if he felt more Parisian or Creusois, he responded ‘a bit of both’. Roger’s experience was similar, buying a house and living partly in Paris, partly in the Creuse thereafter. He evoked powerfully what the Creuse meant to him. In defiance of fact, he said:

Oh well, the Creuse, it’s my native land! […] When you’re born in Paris, the 6th arrondissement, where the roads are cobbled, there’s asphalt on the pavement, and trees have to grow behind cages, you can’t say you’ve really got roots. Yes, my roots, they’re here.

He bought his house in the 1960s just after his children were born, saying to himself, ‘here, these are their roots. They’ll have lots of memories here […] It will be their terroir’. Huguette too expressed her attachment: ‘the Creuse is my adopted region.’ Marie’s daughter-in-law recounted that her maternal grandmother forged a close bond with Henri, the little boy she took in: ‘he always came back’, she said. After his marriage, ‘he came back with his wife, he came back with his children, very, very often’. He visited her grandmother in hospital, and was always present at family events, weddings and baptisms, ‘as though he was part of the family’. During his numerous post-war visits, Jacques K met his future wife, and he too ended up owning property in her native region. Writing of the evacuee taken in by her husband’s family, Alice remarked that ‘Paul always said that he’d found a family’. Evacuees did not always keep such close contact; Marie said that her family lost touch with Georgette, and Françoise told me that Marcelle was reticent in contacting them. But in each case, the past did not stay in the past. This is what oral histories make clear. André reflected in the interview on his parents’ decision to evacuate him to his aunt’s house in the Creuse where, in many ways, he had a jolly good time with his eccentric aunt, his cousin Michel, the twins and plenty of rural freedom; yet, he said, ‘it’s there that I want to know the why of it. But too late’, for his parents were no longer there when the questions arose in his mind. ‘But that shocked me for a few years, you know. That me, on my own, I was there, and my brother and sister […] they stayed with my parents’. He felt a conflict, saying with some emotion: ‘for a while
I felt like I’d been abandoned by mother’. Huguette summed up the important dialogue of meaning between past, present and future. She said ‘It’s my past, but it’s there that my future was cast, thanks to that couple who took me in, and whom I can never thank enough’.

9. Conclusion

These interviews deal only with a handful of individuals. In my archival research, I have uncovered fragments of many other stories, happy and sad. But the reality of history, and its power to change lives across time, is only revealed by talking to people, and allowing them to reflect upon the meaning of the events of their pasts. So much of the impact of the Second World War is destruction. For Jews and others abused, persecuted, hunted and murdered, it was a catastrophe, a Shoah; their story runs alongside that which I tell here; their pain and suffering was frequently mentioned by the interviewees, who knew of families in hiding, and had learnt the scale of human destruction after the war. But the impact of war is idiosyncratic. A sorrow may lead to a joy, a pain to a pleasure. As we talked, Jacques P had open on the table before us a photo album with several pictures of a little boy in a country garden: a little boy holding a rabbit, on a scooter, posing with an older couple. Written across the top, it said ‘Happy memory’. He had labelled it thus for his son, one day, to see. He told me: ‘Yes, for me, these are happy memories. It was the war, we walked in clogs […] but for me it was a happy period, a happy childhood.’

Figure 22: Jacques P holding a rabbit, in Saint-Dizier-Leyrennes. ‘Happy memory’. Source: private collection (undated)
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