

FIVE OBLATES OF LA BROSSE

Lucien Wisselmann, O.M.I.



OBLATE
HERITAGE

12

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by
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FIVE OBLATES OF LA BROSSE

The Victims

On July 24, 1944, five Oblates were killed in full view of the community of La Brosse-Montceaux. The three groups in the scholasticate, priests, professors, scholastics, brothers, were all represented. Fathers Christian Gilbert and Albert Piat were professors, Lucien Perrier and Jean Cuny were scholastics, and Joachim Nio was a brother.

Fr. Christian Gilbert O.M.I.

Father Christian Gilbert, aged 32, from Asnières, near Paris, was professor of moral theology. He was well-liked as a spiritual director and confessor. He was also director of the choir. Learned and reserved, he was a man of holiness. Those seated near him in the chapel recalled seeing him wrapped in devotion, holding his oblation cross, during thanksgiving after Mass. He had the desire to be a martyr, and he once wrote, *"We have the right to know the limits of our strength and to know how to go even beyond them."* This found fulfilment on July 24.

Fr. Albert Piat O.M.I.

Fr. Albert Piat, 35, was from Roubaix, in the north, and was professor of Scripture. Each week he traveled to Paris to follow courses at the "Catholic Institute". It seems that it was there that he first had contact with the publishers of the underground journal "Christian Witness", and he made it known to his acquaintances. For his biblical studies he continued to perfect his knowledge of German. He was also involved in pastoral ministry in a nearby parish. By nature he was a sensitive, rather shy, person.

Lucien Perrier O.M.I.

The scholastic Lucien Perrier, aged 26, was from Pontmain (Mayence). This has a Marian shrine well-beloved of the Oblates. He had studied at the Oblate juniorate and in 1944 was in theology. During his military service he attained the rank of officer-cadet, in the French army. At the top of his diary he inscribed a Latin motto which read. *"Our country should be more precious to us even than ourselves."* His patriotism was tied to a lively confidence in the Sacred Heart. He had a presentiment that he might die young, and

he also had the same desire. In a letter to his parents he had asked their permission to lay down his life, foreseeing that he could be involved in the liberation of his homeland. He was preparing to make his perpetual oblation in the following September, but another offering - death itself - was asked of him on July 24th.

Jean Cuny O.M.I.

Jean Cuny, scholastic, was also 26 years old; a native of Blainville, near Nancy, in Meurthe-et-Moselle. He was what may be called a "late vocation", as he had worked for three years in a factory before becoming a student at the juniorate. Whilst there he was called to military service in 1939. He was wearing his juniorate cross when the captain of his unit died in his arms. He did his novitiate 1942-43 at Pontmain. He had almost finished his first year of philosophy, and was dean of his class. He led a frugal life, and he was seen by his classmates as a future missionary. One of his friends, from whom he asked a loan of his classnotes to catch up on his work, said that he seemed often distracted. He soon saw why.

Br. Joachim Nio O.M.I.

Brother Joachim Nio, whose christian name evoked St. Anne, patroness of his native Brittany, was 45 years old, and originally from St. Jean-Brevelay, Morbihan. He was of short built, helpful and hard-working. He was the porter and shoemaker for the community. He would become the victim of his work.

Where the Drama took Place

The village of La Brosse-Montceaux is situated in the mid-north of France, and was occupied by the Germans after the surrender of June 1940. It included all the area along the Atlantic. From the Spanish border its line of demarcation went up along the Loire and to the north of Lyons. In general the Oblate Province of France-North was in the occupied zone, whereas the territory of France-Midi was in the free zone. The Province of France-Est (Alsace-Lorraine) corresponded to the area annexed by Germany between 1871 and 1918. It had been annexed again in June of 1940 and cut off completely from France. Many of the Oblates there had been expelled. The majority



The Scholasticate of La Brosse-Montceaux

of them had come to France-Midi, but some to France-Nord. These were at La Brosse-Montceaux. The so-called “free zone” was occupied by the German army on November 11, 1942.

The scholasticate of France-Nord was re-established in France in 1933, after the expulsion 50 years earlier of all religious congregations, when it had been gone to Liège in Belgium. The scholasticate was situated at La Brosse-Montceaux, 80 kms to the south-east of Paris and 25 kms from Fontainebleau, just on the edge of the regions of Seine-et-Marne and Yonne. It was housed in an 18th century chateau in the middle of a large property between the two sections of the village of La Brosse-Montceaux. From the front of the main entrance the national route, Paris-Lyon, could be seen, and not far away was the Paris-Lyon-Marseille railway. Below it ran the Yonne river which emptied into the Seine a few kilometres from the small industrial town of Montereau. This part of Beauce and Brie was rich in agricultural development.

It was not by accident that the “Frères Missionnaires des Campagnes” were founded in this part of Seine-et-Marne. (Even in 1942 the question was being asked as to whether France was then a missionary country). The Oblates were responsible for the parish of La Brosse-Montceaux, and for some other rural ones in the area.

One needs to be aware of the environment to understand what happened at La Brosse-Montceaux. The position of the large scholasticate property, slightly removed from the built-up zone, its wide-open position in the countryside, its proximity to major axes of communication leading to Paris - all these attracted the leaders of the network of armed resistance to the occupation to try to involve the Oblates. And the Oblates were inclined to become involved for religious motives, as a witness to a Christian presence in this effort. As Fr. Henry du Halgouët remarked, the particular part of the country in which La Brosse-Montceaux was situated, up against the working town of Montereau, inevitably put the Oblates in contact with people of all religions and political persuasions, especially with communists engaged in armed struggle. These people would not have understood if the religious had remained aloof and let other people take all the risks. Resistance could be organized, because the people, particularly since 1942, were drawing away more and more from the government of Marshall Pétain and the Vichy regime.

The Drama

The drama unfolded in the last months of the second world war. The allied landing took place on June 6, 1944, and the efforts of the Resistance increased. The Germans were on their last legs, even more so after the attempt on Hitler's life and its repercussions on the Paris garrison. The breakthrough on the German front in Normandy by the allied troops took place on July 25, the day after the sacrifice of the Oblates. The liberation of the country went ahead rapidly. La Brosse-Montceaux had a part to play in the liberation of Paris on August 25, as was acknowledged by the giving of a medal to La Brosse-Montceaux on the fiftieth anniversary of the liberation.

The Scholasticate Community

The scholasticate community at this time had around a 100 members - ten priests, 10 brothers and almost 80 scholastics. Some recently ordained scholastic priests had received their assignments and had just left. There were some other Oblates who belonged to the community, but

**Patriotism at
LaBrosse**

who had been prisoners of war in Germany since 1940. One of the students, Gilbert Thibeaut, was also missing, for he had been arrested in 1943. He was in prison at Fresnes, and the Superior of the scholasticate was able to keep contact through the chaplain Abbé Franz Stock. But then Gilbert was moved to a concentration camp in Germany.



*Fr. Albert Piat, O.M.I.
1909-1944*

The letters sent and received by the students were full of patriotic sentiments. Among the Oblates at the Scholasticate were some who had been mobilized into the army in 1939, and who had taken part in fighting in May-June 1940. Taken prisoner, they were then liberated. Other younger ones had escaped from forced labour squads in Germany, and were living under false names with fabricated identity cards. One scholastic priest, after his ordination, had gone to

Germany as a worker. This was to help those working there as a secret chaplain, as other priests were already doing at the behest of the bishops. Forced labour ("Service du Travail Obligatoire") was a constant threat to the most numerous group in the scholasticate, the philosophy students. The youngest of these were 19 and 20 years old and had had to present themselves to a review board in Montereau two or three months earlier. Fr. Luke Miville, an American Oblate, former secretary of the Superior General, Fr. Labouré, who had just died, was also hiding there. And for more than a year five or six Oblates were obliged to mount guard in turn on a section of the local railway line from midnight to 5.00 am. The priests listened to the forbidden broadcast from Radio

London of a programme called "The French Speak to the French." They also kept a record on wall charts of the movement of the warring armies.



*Lucien Perrier, O.M.I.
1918-1944*

All of these show the atmosphere prevailing in the scholasticate. Despite all, the religious and academic life went on as normal. The quality of teaching did not suffer because of the active involvement of Fathers Albert Piat and Christian Gilbert in the Resistance, nor in the case of Father Henri du Halgouët who taught the first year philosophy course. The greater part of the students knew nothing of their clandestine activities, but they were not unaware of their patriotism, which,

however, did not involve contempt or hatred towards the enemy. The whole community hoped for victory of de Gaulle and the Allies, and approved of the Resistance both for patriotic and religious reasons. But one old priest of the community was in favour of the Vichy government and its policy of collaboration with the Germans.

Unaware of this spirit of resistance at La Brosse-Montceaux was a German Oblate, Fr. Friedrich Finn, conscripted into the medical service of the Wehrmacht, and lodged in the neighboring village of Villeneuve-la-Guyard. He visited the scholasticate a number of times on Sunday afternoons. He attended Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament and shared the evening meal with the scholastics. To show that he came as an Oblate confrere he removed his gun and ostentatiously left it in the entrance lobby. The writer of these lines, who served as interpreter

Taking Part in the Resistance

on his visit, mentioned this to certain members of the community, even to the Superior, when they seemed uneasy about him.

In France, at this time, there were two types of resistance - passive and active. There were varying degrees of both, and one often led to the other. Here are three of many examples. An American pilot, whose plane crashed in the Ardennes, was rescued by an Oblate, Fr. Jean Rousseau, a pastor in that area. Around Easter 1944 he brought him to La Brosse-Montceaux. Fr. Henri du Halgouët looked after him for a month, before passing him over to an escape route group. In another case, a member of the Resistance, hunted by the Germans, sought refuge in the scholastic and Fr. Du Halgouët cared for him, hiding him in his own room. Another example, a young scholastic, Martin Quéré, had gone to the village cemetery to clean the Oblate plot, opened up some flagstones and discovered stairs leading into a vault. He spotted the scholastic Jean Cuny coming out of it. Cuny was upset at being seen and told Martin that he was making a hiding place for some valuables from the house. He was content with this explanation, but the Brothers who were working inside had a loaded machine-gun there ready to ward off unwanted intruders.



*Jean Cuny, O.M.I.
1918-1944*

Because of his business obligations, the Bursar, Fr. Pierre Letourneur, had contact with groups of the armed resistance. The involvement of the Oblates in this type of

struggle was known only to a few besides the 10 who were personally implicated. The superior of the scholasticate, Fr. Henry Tassel, and the Provincial of France-Nord Province, Fr. Henri Verkin, were aware of it. The greatest discretion was required. It was necessary to hide these activities from the other men in the house, and to be seen with them at community exercises. Many knew nothing. But some guessed. To stem rumours and to calm growing concern, several days before July 24, the Superior, during a spiritual conference, had strongly urged the scholastics not to talk any longer about arms; as this would have been irresponsible and foolish. He said, "*the life of members of the community depend on this*" and he suggested that the scholastics become involved as paramedics, as stretcher bearers, as blood donors if circumstances demanded that they take a role in the struggle that was foreseen for the coming days. This suggestion was more easily accepted, since several of the priests and brothers were already members of the Red Cross of Montereau, and had given help to the victims of the bombing on July 14 of the railway station of Champigny, seven kilometres from La Brosse-Montceaux.

Preparations

In the spring, a French officer parachuted in from London. He had come to reconnoitre the area for a landing or a parachute jump. He had gone with Fr. Henri du Halgouët to inspect the environs of the property. To prove that his mission was genuine he had given to the priest a personal message which could be checked that evening on a radio broadcast from London.

In June, a Gestapo official arrived at the scholasticate. As the superior was absent, Fr. Albert Piat received him. He said that he was searching for a suspect. However, it was an excuse to look over the place. This proved to be useful to him, as he was Korf, the same one who was later to perpetrate the massacre.

Cache of Arms

The first parachuting of arms took place in summer at the end of June or early July, in the middle of the night, at the time and place announced by radio. This was in a big field



*Oblate
Crypt
in the
Parish
Cemetery.
The Cache
of Arms
was hidden
here*

bordered by trees. Around 20 people were there, some who were meeting for the first time. Among them were Fathers Pierre Letourneur, Henri du Halgouët, Albert Piat, Christian Gilbert, and the scholastics Lucien Perrier and Jean Cuny. Twenty containers, weighing about a 100 kilos each, were brought on a horse-drawn dray, in two or three trips, to the village cemetery. The shipment was hidden away in the Oblate vault which was temporarily re-sealed, for it was necessary to get back to the house before dawn, to be in the dormitory or rooms without the others knowing anything. The following night, the Oblate group, all the members of which were now known, along with some others, stacked the arms in empty niches. They couldn't resist keeping the parachutes, since in this time of scarcity the material of which they were made was worth

something. These were put back in the containers, and were put down an abandoned well which had been dug a few years before in the property. This was to prove a fatal mistake.

A delivery of arms was made on July 12 by an ongoing action of the Paris resistance called "Honneur de la Police". One of the members of this group of five who took delivery of the shipment was later suspected by another Resistance group of having betrayed the operation, but Fr. du Halgouët who looked after those arms in the cemetery did not believe this.

Another parachute drop took place in the second half of July. It was not as successful, as some of the parachutes and their loads got stuck in trees. They were only recovered with much trouble, and not completely. Those that remained were hooked on branches and attracted attention. Also, on Saturday, July 22, German soldiers were seen in the fields close to the same trees. Another delivery of arms on the same day, was the cause of the tragedy of two days later, because one of those involved was arrested.

Danger Signs

The next day, Sunday July 23, the superior was informed that in the morning the Germans had made a search in Montereau, where Fr. Christian Gilbert had gone to preach. He was worried, despite the assurances given him that very morning. In the afternoon he said to one of the scholastics at the end of confession, "*Pray hard that we finish the week with our hands and feet intact.*" Lucien



*Fr. Christian Gilbert, O.M.I.
1912-1944*

Perrier also spoke of his worry to a confrere, “*If we get through tomorrow without trouble, we’ll be all right.*” On the evening of July 23 Jean Cuny seemed upset, discouraged, preoccupied. Frs. du Halgouët and Pierre Letourner decided to go and get a hiding place ready in a remote house in the area, which had been earlier designated for this. Fathers Gilbert and Piat thought that it was good idea, but, tired after their weekend work, didn’t go with them. Frs. Letourneur and du Halgouët spent the night alone in the cellar. When they tried to return to the scholasticate the next morning they turned back on hearing the volleys of shots, and after being warned by the neighbors, hid themselves.

The Oblation

On Monday July 24, at 5.15 am, the community was in the chapel at morning prayer and meditation, which was to be followed by Mass. Despite the break from classes, daily exercises continued. Only a few of the Oblates were away. They were engaged in various jobs, among them were those, including the superior, who were taking their turn guarding the railway.

Soon all would be faced with a sacrifice, but not that of the Mass. From the chapel they heard a strange noise. Fr. Albert Piat went out. Probably he wanted to destroy certain documents, like the copies of the underground paper “Christian Witness” (Témoignage Chrétien”).

Then the door of the chapel opened, and Father Superior, coming back from his assigned task of standing guard on the railway, appeared. He was accompanied by a civilian and an armed soldier. He calmly asked the community, whom he called “*my children*”, to come outside, for he said, “*This gentleman wishes to speak to you.*”

They stood in 2 lines, near the cloister, or courtyard, that the Oblates had added at the back of the chateau. There were a hundred soldiers with guns facing a hundred religious in cassocks. Fr. Albert Piat had been brought back by force, as also a scholastic who was working on the

property and who had seen the Germans coming. The man in civilian clothes, the head of the Gestapo, was named Korf, as they found out later, and he called out for the Father Bursar.

Korf spoke French correctly, but with a heavy German accent on certain syllables. Fr. Pierre Letrouneur was not there. A second call, "*Father Bursar*". The superior answered for him, as was customary. But that is not what Korf wanted. He then brought forward a man in handcuffs, beaten, pitiable, with a bloodied face who was made to pass along the rows looking at each one, but did not find the Bursar. Korf next called for the Brother Porter. Brother Joachim Nio came out, and was confronted by the prisoner

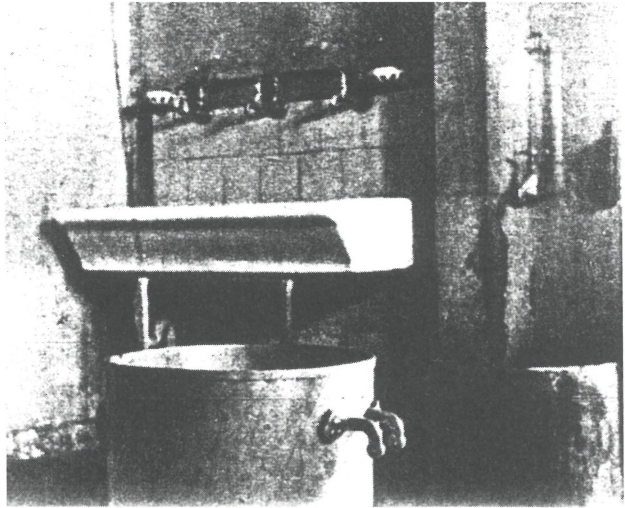


*Br. Joachim Nio, O.M.I.
1898-1944*

who identified him. The head of the Gestapo, who had taken off his jacket and rolled up his sleeves, led Brother to the basement of the house to the room under the chapel where outdoor shoes were changed and shoes polished. The search of the house and its other buildings began. The community had to remain in the field. They were now facing the cloister. On the wall, a notice board and maps showed troop movements according to the news provided by Radio London.

The Search

Soldiers coming and going could be seen. One of them brought up a cooking-pot big enough to hold 100 litres from the kitchen and carried it to the shoe room. Another came from the entertainment communities room, which was on the lower level near the vegetable garden, waving a



*The Torture Room.
Beatings and Near-Suffocation in large Vats of Water.*

red flag as proof of collusion with the communists. But this had been used only in a theatrical play.

Korf reappeared and called out "*Fr. Jean Cuny*," then immediately corrected himself saying "*Br. Jean Cuny*." Brother Jean Cuny stepped forward and he was taken to the shoe room. After that Korf called out for Henri du Halgouët. When told that he was not there he became angry. "*What a strange comedy*", he said (or a "*committee*" according to others), and he threatened to shoot ten of them if he found him in the group. Then the comings and goings continued between the shoe room and the field. Fr. Albert Piat, Fr. Christian Gilbert and Scholastic Lucien Perrier were called. Taking Fr. Christian Gilbert away he said to him in German "*Komm her, Freund*", which several understood as "*Come, my friend*."

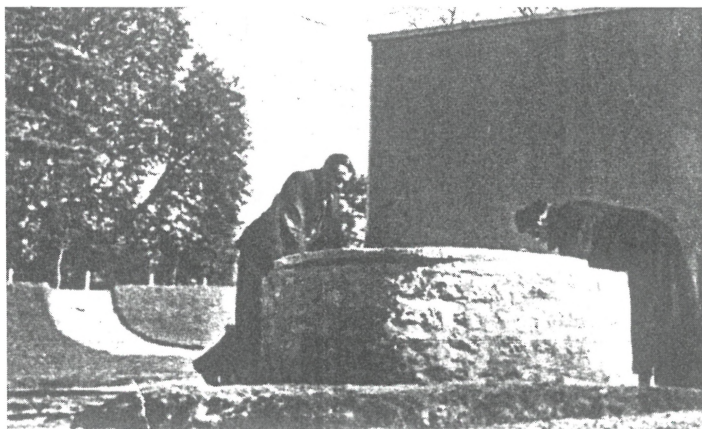
The other members of the group of Resistance workers were waiting to be called. The soldiers took some of the Oblates from the lines, to make them dig up a place in the park where the soil had been freshly disturbed. It turned out

not to be a cache of arms as they thought, but a hole of the root of a tree trunk. Others had to go with the Brother cook to prepare a midday meal for the invaders. In preparation for the meal, an under-officer called out for the “*Brother Cell*” - meaning to ask for the Brother Cellerer. Someone said that this was Br. Joachim Nio who had been already taken away.

Torture

Then, at this time, they saw Brother. He was walking painfully, stooped and supporting himself with a stick, It began to be clear what was happening below. He held his ear, he could not hear well. The unfortunate man had been tortured. He did not wish to obey those who demanded good wine and threatened him. He was brought back to open the cellar, despite himself.

At this time Korf came up and said “*Wir haben gesiegt*”, that is “*We have won.*” He called for a ladder and six people to carry it, who had to go to the garden in the field where the well was. Ten others, including the superior, were taken to bring shovels, buckets, ropes. One of them crossing in front of the shoe room, heard from the basement the sounds of beating. Three scholastics were made to go down the well to dig and take away the soil. Besides this group, and



The Well on the Scholasticate Property Where the Parachutes were Concealed.

those busy in the kitchen, the bigger number of the community had to remain in front of the cloister, until Korf gave the order to move to the well. They then saw the metal cylinders and three dozen parachutes. There was amazement, mixed with wonderment, at the bright colours of the parachutes, among those who knew nothing about them. Was this a trumped-up display by the Germans? A little further in the field, between the well and the road, on the side near the shoe room, a car was parked in which one could make out someone stretched out.

Field of Death

The containers from the well were empty, and this made Korf angry. He wanted to know where the arms were hidden. He started his address by saying "*Fathers and Brothers*", and continued: "*You know where the arms are.*" All denied it. All knew the moral principle that it is not a lie not to tell the truth to someone who does not have the right to know, or who will use this knowledge for evil. Korf threatened to shoot as many as needed, "*Thirty, or all of you.*"

Fr. Christian Gilbert

Fr. Christian Gilbert was led out, his hands tied behind his back, his Oblate cross clearly visible held by the cincture of his cassock. Despite the sufferings that he had undergone, he held himself upright, calm, fifteen metres from the rows of his confrères. In front of them Korf asked him the question, "*You do not wish to tell me where the arms are?*" Father Gilbert simply replied "*Sir, I ask for a priest*". Korf repeated the same question, and Christian Gilbert gave the same answer. One of the priests, Fr. Hippolyte Delarue, cried out, "*Fr. Gilbert, you are given absolution,*" which he did along with other priests present. Immediately Korf, with a burst of shots, killed Fr. Gilbert. Then he went up to him to finish him off, shooting him in the nape of the neck. There was a gasp of horror from the community. "*It's your fault*" replied Korf. And one of his aides, between the executions which were to follow, also said, "*You are barbarians letting your comrades be killed. Poor France!*"

After the death of Fr. Christian Gilbert, all were expecting the very same fate. They knelt, and the most senior priest,

Fr. Edmond Louis, gave general absolution. The soldiers made them stand up again.

Sch. Jean Cuny

The scholastic Jean Cuny then was brought out. He also had his hands tied behind his back and he was put near the body of Fr. Gilbert. To the same question put to him by Korf he replied, "*I know nothing*", and he called out in a loud voice to the priests for absolution. He straightened up, put out his chest, and looked straight into the face of the one about to kill him. When he fell in a hail of bullets, he gave a long groan. Korf gave him the coup de grâce shot with his pistol.

Sch. Lucien Perrier

The same scene followed for Lucien Perrier. He refused to speak. His arms were not tied, so he made a cross with his hands on his chest. He died like a soldier who gives his life for his country.

Fr. Albert Piat

Father Albert Piat, stretched out in the car, tried to raise himself up to see what was happening. He was taken out by Korf. He gathered his opened soutane around him modestly. His feet were bare. He walked with difficulty as the soles of his feet had been burnt. He did not reply to the questions asked. Korf tried three times to shoot him, but his gun would not fire. A soldier gave him another one, but that didn't work either, and he threw it on the ground. They



Memorial Plaque to Fr. Albert Piat, O.M.I.

Br. Joachim Nio

gave him a third one. Father Piat had dropped his arms because of fatigue, but seeing that the priests were giving him absolution, he made a large sign of the cross, and with his usual smile, as if saying goodbye. Korf after having killed him reloaded his gun which he tested by firing towards the garden

Brother Joachim Nio was then brought out in front of the community. He insisted on holding his hands over his eyes as if he didn't wish to see the four bodies laying there, but the light of the sun in front of him pained him because of his torture. His torture had seriously affected his hearing as had been noticed earlier. The soldier with him snatched away the stick on which he was leaning and hit his fingers with handcuffs. To the question, always the same, that Korf asked, Brother replied in the negative. Korf decided to tease him. The soldier guarding Brother made him look directly towards the community. But he couldn't do it, probably because of the angle of the rays of the sun shining at that time of the day. It was from the side that he was shot, and thus fell. This cruel death aroused the greatest sympathy among his confrères, as it was the most unjust. Father Edmond Louis remarked a few days later to Korf that Brother was innocent. The Gestapo chief justified himself by saying that they found a case of dynamite in the porter's office. But was the porter to be held responsible for all packages and parcels that people had the habit of leaving there, and of which he never knew the contents?

Prepared to die

Korf threatened to continue the executions. All were ready to die. What had been learnt in the novitiate and scholasticate had prepared them for death and prepared them to sacrifice their life. The thought of martyrdom was familiar to them. For example, in the novitiate in 1942-43 a play had been presented recalling the death of Fathers Rouvière and Le Roux, martyred in Canada. One of the scholastics present that day at La Brosse, Vincent L'Hénoret, would be killed later in Laos, like others of his confrères who were not yet at La Brosse-Montceaux. There

was no panic, no nervousness. The superior's calmness was infectious. Following his example, many started reciting the rosary. "*The hour of our death*" seemed to be "*now*".

A Reprieve

A car arrived and stopped between the house and the field. Some more senior officers got out and came to look at the well. A heated discussion, almost an argument, took place between their chief, a colonel, and Korf. From snatches of the conversation some of the scholastics who understood German could hear that this officer wanted to stop the massacre. It was his intervention that put an end to the killings. However, according to Fr. Henri Tassel, he had been on the property since early morning, near the gate lodge.

After the departure of the officers of the Wehrmacht Korf called for ten volunteers to pick up the bodies of the victims, and he gave the command to throw them into the well. As they hesitated to do this one of the soldiers kicked the bodies in. Someone managed to save the cross of Fr. Gilbert. They had to cover the bodies with the soil and rocks that had come out of the well. Then Korf threatened to shoot half the diggers. The superior pleaded with him, then addressed the Oblates present, "*The man asks if there is anyone who knows where the arms are*". But there was, as always, the same reply - negative. Nevertheless, with the permission of Korf, a scholastic Jean Bocquené, former sailor and future missionary to Cameroon, who was in the Resistance, approached Fr. Tassel saying, "*Father, is not the life of so many among us worth more than the arms?*"

But Korf called a halt. It was around midday. The parachutes with the containers were loaded onto the military trucks which carried also the things pillaged from the scholasticate. While the soldiers took their meal in the refectory where some of the Oblates had to serve them, the rest of the community remained fasting, waiting in the field. Father Luke Miville was hidden away in the servant's quarters separate from the House, as was a layman, a former prisoner of war, who was visiting. A neighboring

La Brosse Abandoned

child who had been coming for Latin lessons with Fr. Miville was sent away home, and was able to spread the news of what had happened.

In the afternoon, each one, under guard by a soldier, was sent to collect his personal belongings. One of the priests distributed communion, thus saving the profanation of the Blessed Sacrament. The scholastics succeed in saving the precious relic of the heart of the Founder, St. Eugene de Mazenod. Some tried to destroy compromising papers, even by consuming them. The scholastic Jean Guéguen was afraid of the discovery of a tract of “Christian Witness” on the chronicle of Hitler’s terrorism in France. This tract was in his desk in the study hall. He had typed up some copies late that night for Fr. Albert Piat. Those who had to carry their luggage through the shoeroom noticed the large cooking pot, the pools of water, a whip or lash in the sink, evidence of choking in the water, and of whipping.

Imprisonment at Fontainebleau

About 4 pm the community had to get into two trucks. Only the 80 year old Oblate, Brother Joseph Lepannetier, was let free, and he went to live with some of the villagers. The 86 Oblate prisoners were taken to Fontainebleau to an army camp, where the German guards treated them more humanely.

They had to undergo a check of their identity papers, and several escapees from the forced labour squads had false ones. Korf again came on the attack. He made the superior ask all the members of the community one after the other, “*Brother, did you notice anything unusual in the house over the last few days?*” This was far from what one could call a “filial visit.” but they were unaware of a hidden German listening to the conversation. Through this new type of interrogation the Germans gained extra knowledge.

The following day the superior and the gardener, Br. André Ripoché, were brought back to La Brosse-Montceaux. The rest of the arms were found in the Oblate vault. Fr. Henri

The Camp at Compiègne

Tassel and the Brother gardener, both dressed in cassocks, were trying to avoid having photos taken beside the arms for the "*Photographic Service of the Germany Army*" as they would have been shown as "*religious terrorists*", members of the "*conspiracy of cassocks*"!

On July 26, the feast of St. Anne, dear to the many Bretons at the scholasticate, the hope of an early liberation was born, then dashed. The community was charged with "passive cooperation with the Resistance and the receiving of arms." They had to undergo a medical examination as a prelude to life in a prison camp. One of the priests, 70 years old, was set free, because of his collaborationist tendencies. On Friday, July 28th the 85 Oblates were led out to some trucks. Because of the cross in the cincture and the cassocks of those seated at the back while they were crossing Paris the news of the arrest of the Oblates became widely known.

They arrived at Royallieu, beside Compiègne, about 80 kms north of Paris. This was a transit camp where convoys of prisoners for the concentration camps in Germany were assembled. The arrival of 85 religious in cassocks caused a sensation among the prisoners. After a few days, they were forced to dress in the civilian clothes given by the Red Cross. The reliquary of the heart of the Founder was entrusted for security to a distinguished prisoner, Mons Pierre Théas, Bishop of Montauban, who was kept apart from the other prisoners. From there the reliquary was confided to the chaplain of the prisoners, Abbé Jean Rodhain, on one of his visits.

A Community in Jail

Despite the internment, religious life continued at Compiègne as at Fontainebleau. All tried to fulfill the various religious exercises, in so far as that was possible. Portable Mass kits given to priest prisoners of war enabled Mass to be said each day very early in the morning. One felt close to the Christians of the catacombs. The community, divided in 2 rooms, was able to maintain an identity. The unity, the cohesion of the members, was

reinforced by the events of July 24. The conditions of captivity eliminated the distinctions between priests, scholastics and brothers. And, especially, all had been struck by the death of their five confrères and wished to show themselves worthy of their courage. Those who had not been aware before now approved of involvement in active resistance. In prison there was no criticism or reproaches against those who had been involved, but had not been caught.

Liberation

In August 14, the Oblates became part of a convoy which was to head to Germany, but a bombing raid on the Compiègne railway station upset the plans. They set off in cattle trucks, but they didn't get much beyond Péronne where the railway lines were cut. It was there that they were liberated on August 21st by the advance of the Allies. At a ceremony at a monument to the dead of a town, one of the prisoners, who put himself forward as the spokesperson, expressed the wish at the end of his speech for "*a France free and strong.*" A priest called out to him, "*and Christian*", and the speaker, perhaps of a different opinion because of personal feelings, was obliged to add it. The conclusion of this speech, "*a Christian France*" was the justification of many of those who took part in the Resistance.

The Return

After September 8, 1944, some of the priests and brothers were able to get back and to take possession of La Brosse-Montceaux. The house had been occupied by the Germans for a few weeks and was stripped bare. However they were surprised to find a locked cupboard containing the sacred vessels from the chapel. It was found out later that Fr. Friedrich Finn, the German Oblate pressed into the medical service as mentioned above, had arranged for their safe-keeping. The presence of a German Oblate in the area cast a ray of hope on the drama of La Brosse-Montceaux, and offered the seeds of reconciliation.

Fathers Letourneur and du Halgouët had wanted to rejoin the community on the morning of July 24, but the

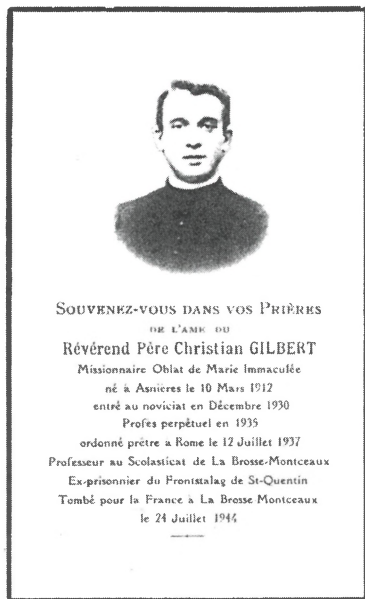
property had been sealed off by the Germans. They spent the day in dreadful anguish. Neighbours brought them to the Archbishop of Sens, Mons. Lamy. He was a friend of the Oblates and arranged a refuge for them at a Sister's house in the town. Father du Halgouët tried to comfort Fr. Letourneur, crushed by the events for which he held himself responsible. A pointed question which tortured them both was "What had become of the survivors?" After two weeks, Mons Lamy, who had heard of the appeal of Cardinal Tisserant for chaplains for the "maquis", the underground, suggested to the two Fathers to go to the Benedictine Abbey of "Pierre-qui-vire" where there were several resistance groups in the area. Father Letourneur became chaplain to one of these and stayed with them right up to the battle of Alsace and the liberation of the country.

The First Reactions

After the events of July 24, 1944 the consultors of the Provincial of the France-Nord Province blamed him for having given permission for the resistance work without consulting them. Some were shocked that the arms were hidden in a consecrated place, in the cemetery in the vault of the Oblate community. Reference was made in later publications to "*the abandoned vault, the profaned cemetery*". It was in the same vault that the bodies of the five victims were buried after having been exhumed from that tragic well. Father Hilaire Balmès, Vicar General of the Congregation, who presided at the ceremony on the following October 16, applied to them the verse of Psalm 50 "*Exultabunt Domino ossa humiliata*", i.e. These humiliated bones will exult in the Lord."

At the time of the retreat preached in the scholasticate from October 25-28, 1944 Fr. Balmès gave a talk dealing with the matter. One needs to distinguish, he said, between passive resistance and armed resistance. To hide Jews, and that involved risks, was laudable. But armed resistance is forbidden to priests and religious by the law of the Church. However, those who did this, subjectively, had good intentions, and it brought about good results. Happy fault!

Father Balmès quoted the witness of the Apostolic Nuncio in France, Valerio Valeri, who had spoken on the subject of the value of Christian example in the face of communism and of the reactions of the priests of the region according to whom the events of La Brosse-Montceaux had become more like a mission which drew people to God. He added that God, from the supernatural point of view, had chosen this moment to fulfill Fr. Christian Gilbert's desire for martyrdom.



*“In Memoriam” Card
of Christian Gilbert, O.M.I.*

Oblate Forgiveness

Nine years after these events, at the beginning of December 1953, the German Commandant, Korf, was brought to justice before the military tribunal of Paris. The Archbishop of Cologne, Mons. Frings, in the name of the “Pax Christi” movement, contacted the Oblate Superior General pleading that the Oblates as witnesses at the trial ask for clemency. But Fr. Henri Tassel felt that it was not the moment or the place to do this, since the accused was also guilty at the same time of other massacres, where there were many more victims.

Korf was condemned to death, and his appeal for remission was refused. In 1954, Father Henri Tassel and Father Leo Deschâtelets, Superior General, each on their own behalf, wrote to the President of France asking for pardon. This was granted. Father General was informed of this in a letter of March 3, 1955 from the President: *“The President was presented with the dossier of Wilhelm Korf and despite the gravity of his crimes, has seriously taken into account the*

Christian generosity with which you, as head of the missionary family which was stricken, has asked pardon for him. He has granted remission of capital punishment.”

This presidential pardon was badly regarded by some of the Resistance, and by members of the families of other victims of Korf. One of those in charge of a resistance movement demanded an explanation from Fr. Tassel. In his reply Fr. Tassel concluded with this wish: *“If these deaths of some of our men and the pardon of Korf could at least serve as a coming together of both peoples and give us a better understanding that reaches over and above hatred, these deaths would not have been in vain.”* The pardon by the



Wilhelm Korf-Gestapo of Melun

Oblates was not understood by all. At the fiftieth anniversary ceremonies in La Brosse-Montceaux in 1994, a relative of a victim of Korf's massacre told one of the Oblates who had escaped July 24, of his regret that criminal had been pardoned. The sentence of death had been commuted to life imprisonment. But, around ten years later, in the climate of Franco-German reconciliation, Korf was set free.

The Witness of Five Oblates

The events of La Brosse-Montceaux have remained alive in the memory of the people. This was because of the circumstances of the place and time - they took place close to Paris, at the moment of the break-through in the German front in Normandy. The hidden arms were also destined for the uprising in Paris which was liberated on the following August 25. The imprisonment of all the scholasticate

reawoke the image of the “Conspiracy of cassocks.” La Brosse-Montceaux has become an emblematic place symbolic of religious resistance in France, even though elsewhere there had been other actions just as brave. One should not forget the numerous secular and religious priests, the sisters and brothers, and Christian laity who gave their life for a patriotic and Christian ideal, besides all those others who died simply for their country.

Like all those innumerable Resistance workers, our five Oblates are considered martyrs according to common usage - martyrs of the Resistance. But they are not martyrs in the theological sense of the word. They were killed primarily for political motives, and not out of hatred for the faith. They did not die like several dozens of priests, secret chaplains in forced labour camps, or seminarians, religious and lay people following the decree of persecution put out by the Nazis in German in December 1943 against the French Catholic Action. These were truly martyrs. Still, a Christian motivation was present in the death of Fathers Christian Gilbert and Albert Piat, of the scholastics Lucien Perrier and Jean Cuny, and the of Brother Joachim Nio. But one can never know if anti-religious or anti-Christian motives moved Korf at the moment of torture and execution. It has even said that a few hours later, in a restaurant at a neighboring village, he said, “*Give me a good dinner, I’ve just shot five priests.*”

It is not only for one’s homeland, but also for God, that one can give one’s life. Their death can be regarded as a sacrifice or an oblation to God. Their involvement in armed resistance can also be considered as a crusade against Nazi neopaganism. According to Cardinal Tisserant, the war of 1939-1945 was a war not like other wars, because of its ideology and anti-Christian measures. Even if one cannot speak of a true martyrdom in their case, there was nevertheless, a true Christian witness on their part. “Christian Witness”, the clandestine paper whose publication betokened the French Resistance and which Fr. Albert Piat spread around, characterized the sacrifice of the five Oblates at La Brosse-Montceaux as such.



Memorial to the Five Men of La Brosse in the Grounds of the Former Scholasticate, with Names of other Oblates, and a local Priest, who died in the War.

Judgement

The judgement that one can give on these dramatic events varies according to one's point of view, or to where one stands. Patriots and politicians sprung from the Resistance approve the action of the Oblates. But one often hears a certain restraint on the part of Church and religious authorities which condemn the participation of religious in armed resistance. The survivors themselves are faced with the question of the legitimacy of their actions. There was on their part after the events, a discretion, even a certain reluctance, to speak. On certain points, for example to know in which order the victims were called out, they remained vague. Out of consideration, the French Oblates who were witnesses to this drama did not wish to broach the subject with German Oblates whom they had occasion to meet. Father Finn has also been discreet. Many of his confrères of the German Province knew nothing of his presence near La Brosse-Montceaux on that July 24. Fifty years later, facts can be judged more calmly.

How can one forget that it was German Catholics who most vigorously advanced the Cause of Beatification of Marcel Callo, a French Jociste martyr for the faith at Mauthausen in 1945. How can one not remember that the German Oblates themselves had a martyr of Nazism, Fr. Friedrich Lorenz, O.M.I. decapitated at Halle in 1944?

At the celebrations for the fiftieth anniversary, on July 24, 1994, Mons. Gérard Defois, Archbishop of Sens, in his address, raised the question in the following terms, and at the same time gave an answer:

“How could religious bound to obedience respond to a duty of disobedience? Traditionally, religious were respectful of the legitimate order, but then had to grow in conscience not to accept this, but to stand up for liberty and say “No” to a blind acceptance of a forced situation. It is difficult for us in our climate of peace to appreciate the anguish of humble and faithful people facing a necessary insurrection so as to be able to look up to heaven as worthy and free persons. Yes, how could disciples of love and non-violence hear the call of duty to the point of hiding arms in the vault of their Fathers? The real sacrifice is this change of conscience, so that man can respect himself as man, and that to be worthy they had to do violence to themselves, to their conscience.”

The remembrance service took place in front of the monumental cross erected there where Fathers Christian Gilbert and Albert Piat, Scholastics Lucien Perrier and Jean Cuny, and Brother Joachim Nio died. One can read there the words of Jesus Christ, “Greater love than this has no man than to lay down his life for his friends.”

**Remem-
brance of
the Oblates
at La Brosse**

The Oblates have been gone from La Brosse-Montceaux for twenty years, but they are not forgotten. The new owner of the property respects the site of the shooting where the monument and the five individual crosses are. Each year,

the authorities of Labrosse-Montceaux and the association of former combatants of the area commemorate July 24, with patriotic and religious celebration. On the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary, an “Association to Remember the Oblates of Mary Immaculate who died for France” - “Association pour le souvenir des Oblats de Marie Immaculée morts pour la France” (A.S.O.M.M.F.) was founded by the municipal council of La Brosse-Montceaux, the committee of former combatants, the victims of the war of Montereau, and the owner of the property. This association was organized on July 24, 1994. It shows the attachment of the population to the Oblates. The region was affected by the sacrifice of our five confreres who wished ‘that a civilization of love should come about’, as one can read on the pedestal of the stone close to the gate at the entrance to the park inaugurated at this anniversary. Their death was not useless: it continues to bear fruit.



Gathering of Members of the Resistance at La Brosse-Montceaux at the Monument to the Deceased Oblates, in 1994.

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