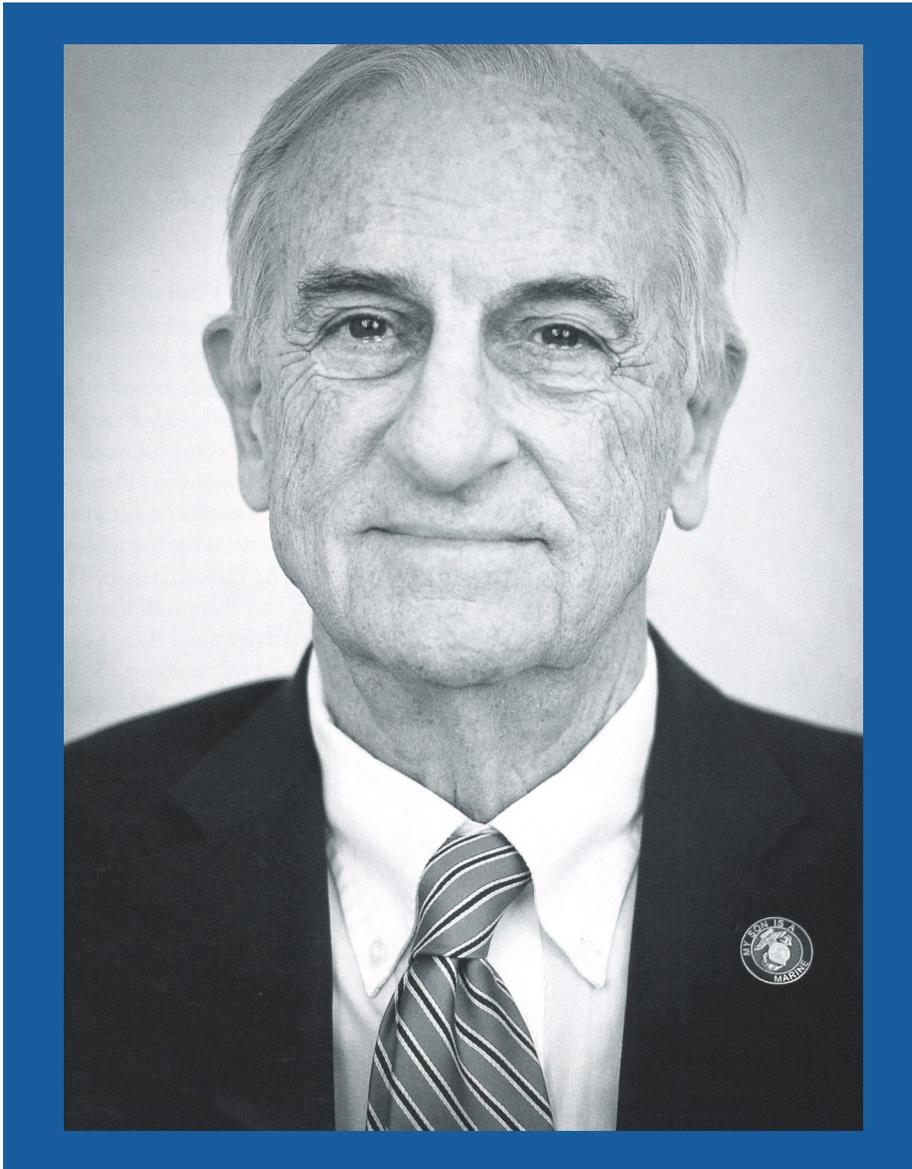


Michel (Mike) Ashe



Ordinary People, Extraordinary Heroes

by Michel C. Ashe

July 2018. I am standing in the plaza of Arthès, a Catholic village in southern France. It is the villahe my mother brought me to in 1940, as we were fleeing the Nazis. It is the village where we stayed, accepted and protected, as the Holocaust took its terrible toll. Arthès was a town of ordinary people who did extraordinary things. People like Violette and Guillaume Dubec and Camile Igalens, whose heroic, selfless actions saved our lives. Now I am back there, with my own children and grandchildren, to honor the Dubecs and M. Igalens and to express my profound gratitude. And to proudly witness the presentation of Israel's Certificate of Honor and Medal of the Righteous Among the Nations to their descendants.

My story begins in late 1940 in Paris, where my mother and I were living in a small apartment. I was about a year old at that time. My father was away serving with the French Resistance. France had surrendered to the Germans in June of 1940. Germany occupied the northern and western parts of France, including Paris. After my mother was denounced by neighbors as a Jew and had a close call with German Wehrmacht soldiers, she took me and what little she could carry and fled. Making contact with the Resistance, she got us by train to

Arthès. My father joined us later. At that time, the south of France was unoccupied by the Germans and was governed by the Vichy. It was a hotbed of Resistance activity, and both of my parents participated.

To the 900 villagers in Arthès, it was obvious who we were and why we had arrived. But those brave citizens - facing arrest, shame, or even death - determined that they would not follow orders to denounce Jews in hiding and turn them over to the Vichy police. At great

personal risk to themselves and their families, the citizens of Arthès and neighboring Saint-Juery refused to identify us or turn us in. If they had, it would have meant deportation to the concentration camps and certain death for my parents and me. Instead, they welcomed us, sheltered us, and, when necessary, hid us during the dark years from 1940 until the liberation in 1945.

Whenever Guillaume Oubec learned of an impending raid by the Vichy police, he would hasten us to his home to hide. Guillaume and Violette Dubec and their son Michel (who was five years older than me and a conscious participant) hid us in a small space on the second floor of their house behind a false wall under a staircase.

My father, a tailor by trade, was able to earn a living because of the Dubecs' kindness and generosity. They gave him a room in their home where my father set up his tailor shop. From this second-floor room my father had a view of the town square, dominated by a huge crucifix, and any activity there. He could also see our apartment, which was across the square from the Dubec home. The family that rented us the small apartment knew we were Jewish and that we were in hiding, but they never disclosed to the Vichy that we were Jews and thus provided us with a home.

Camile Igalens, the village blacksmith, also risked much to save us. Sometimes, when M. Dubec learned of an impending raid, there was no time to get to our normal hiding place in



Mike Ashe's parents with baby Michel Claude Ashe (about three months old) with his parents Joseph and Hilde in Paris, spring of 1940, before Germany marched into France and occupied Paris.

the Dubec home. On those occasions, M. Igalens would bring us to his blacksmith shop to hide behind the forge while the Vichy police ransacked our apartment looking for us.

My parents, like many survivors, were reluctant to talk about these years. Because of my young age, my memory and recollections are vague and are based on those stories my parents did share with me later.

During the years that we spent in Arthès, we lived in constant fear, although I was unaware in the early years as I was a very young child. From time to time, when things became too dangerous for us to remain in Arthès, we went to live in an abandoned farmhouse in the surrounding countryside.

But the more rural setting was not necessarily safer, as illustrated by one incident relayed to me by my mother. We had gone to a neighboring farmhouse to get milk and eggs. Suddenly, in the distance, we could see German troops approach. My mother grabbed me, ran out of the back of the farmhouse, down a meadow into a ravine and up a very steep slope. I have vague memories of seeing the soldiers point at us. Back at our farmhouse, my mother told my father to hide. He hid in a coal bin and she covered him with coal. Shortly after, the Germans came through, searched the house, and left.

Another recollection of life in Arthès was that every day an old man, beating a drum, would come to the Town Square to deliver the news.



Adolf Hitler salutes Admiral Francois Darlan upon his arrival at the Berghof. Darlan was a French admiral who later became Vice Premier of the Vichy government. Photo with permission of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration.

He was dressed in a WWI uniform with classic French hat, and sported a bushy, white handlebar mustache. He would stop at the foot of the crucifix, unfurl a scroll, and read the news of the day. I learned later that he was a Nazi sympathizer who read Vichy and Nazi propaganda. I was told that, after the war, he was exposed by the Resistance and killed by the partisans for being a collaborator.

In late 1942, German troops occupied Vichy

France in the southeastern region. They now occupied all of France. By late 1943, things again became too dangerous and it was too difficult to go into hiding with a young boy (me) and a baby - as my sister was born in late 1943. I was sent to a Catholic orphanage in Acarchon, a seaside town about 250 miles away. It is my understanding that this was arranged by the OSE, the Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants. My parents pinned a nametag on my clothes, and I traveled by train with a

woman who was going there.

I did not know I was Jewish so my first recollection of religion was attending church: every morning we marched to the church, where I did what the boy in front of me did - dipped my hand in the holy water, knelt, and made the sign of the cross. I think I remained there for about a year until it was safe for me to go back home. My parents never visited me.

I went back to Arthès the same way I got there: by train. The nuns put a name tag on my clothes, and I was accompanied by a stranger who was going to Albi, a nearby town.

After the war, we remained in Arthès, where we lived a quiet life. In 1949, my parents, sister, and I were finally able to immigrate to the United States to join relatives living in Norfolk who had immigrated before the war. We were happy to be reunited with so many family members. However, many other family members perished during the Holocaust, including my maternal and paternal grandparents. My father continued his work as a tailor in Norfolk in a shop with his brother-in-law; my mother worked as a clerk for a state agency. My parents had two more children. They were very proud that their four children became successful adults: my two sisters became teachers; my brother, a family physician, and I became an architect. Some years later, my parents moved to Richmond, where they lived until they passed away in 1992 and 2002, respectively. They lived their

lives with humility, simplicity, and gratitude. They very seldom spoke of the past; they never spoke of returning to Arthès. It would have meant so much to them, to know that their son and his children and grandchildren returned to Arthès more than seventy years later. They would have been enormously pleased and proud of the lasting honor and tribute of profound gratitude, that the Dubecs and M. Igalens were named Righteous Among the Nations by Yad Vashem. The Bronze Plaque dedicated by our family to the people of Arthès will be viewed and appreciated by generations to come.

As a young child during that time, I did not fully understand the dangers my family faced. Nor did I appreciate that my family's very existence depended on the courage, goodness, compassion, and strength of people like Guillaume and Violette Dubec and Camile Igalens, who risked their lives and freedom to protect my family. Only now, as a grown man with children and grandchildren, am I able to begin to understand and appreciate the actions of these good people.

Honoring Their Heroes. Thoughts of honoring the Dubecs and M. Igalens began several years ago. By chance, I met Ruth Hartz, a child survivor like me, when she was the 2011 Tidewater Holocaust Commission's Yom Hashoah speaker. It was b'shert, destined to be. We discovered that she and her parents had been hidden in the same small town in the south of France. She put me in contact with Alain Fabre, a journalist who lives in

neighboring Saint-Juèry. He informed me that Michel Dubec still lived in Arthès, and in the very same house. Alain, who is not Jewish and whose parents were also in the French Resistance during the war, was the vital link that brought us together.

In 2014, my oldest son and his family visited Arthès. Alain arranged for them to meet Michel Dubec and see the house where we were sheltered. Then, in August 2015, my wife and I, along with my daughter and her family, visited Arthès. It was the first time I'd been in touch with these people since leaving in 1949. Once there, I was reunited with my childhood friends Michel Dubec and Henri Lafon.

My children and grandchildren were able to



Mike and his sister after the war



Mike's granddaughter Jordan standing in the family's Holocaust hiding place.

meet these wonderful people. They were able to walk through the town square and see the one-room apartment where my parents and I lived. They were able to go inside the Dubec home, where Michel Dubec and his wife still live. They stood underneath the same staircase with the false wall where we were hidden. This was an incredibly moving experience for my grandchildren.

After being with the families and recalling the events in Arthès during WWII and the Holocaust, we knew that we wanted to honor them by submitting their names to Yad Vashem, Israel's official memorial to the victims of the Holocaust. After almost two years of thorough investigation by Yad Vashem,

Guillaume and Violette Dubec and Camile Igalens were named Righteous Among the Nations. They are among some 27,000 to share this honor. Names of the Righteous are inscribed on the Wall of Honor at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem.

In July 2018, my family - my wife, our two sons, daughter, son-in-law, and three grandchildren - traveled again with me to Arthès to attend the formal presentation of the Medals of the Righteous. We went to honor the Dubecs and M. Igalens, and to share this inspiring moment.

The ceremony was held in an auditorium near the same town square in Arthès where my parents, sister, and I lived during the Holocaust. The apartment building, the Dubec home, and the crucifix are all still there.

Several hundred people were in attendance, most citizens of Arthès and Saint-Juèry, as well as state and local dignitaries. My three granddaughters read a poignant poem in French, "Le Badge." I was honored and humbled when asked to give prepared remarks in French.

The Israeli consul general to France presented the Medals of the Righteous to Michel Dubec, son of Guillaume and Violette Dubec; and to Marie-Helene Chamayou and Jean-Pierre Igalens, the grandchildren of Camile Igalens. Then we walked to the church and presented a bronze plaque honoring the two families and all of the people of Arthès. The plaque is in

Hebrew and reads (English translation):

***"Whoever saves a single life,
saves an entire universe"***

With this plaque, we pay tribute to the courage and extraordinary bravery of Guillaume and Violette Dubec and Camile Igalens who, at the risk of their lives, with the other citizens of Arthès and Saint-Juèry, hid Joseph and Hilde Aschkenas and their children, Michel and Njcole, from the Nazi barbarism and the French state of Vichy during the Second World War.

This plaque is dedicated with eternal love, gratitude, and friendship by Michel Claude Ashe (Aschkenas), his wife, his children, his grandchildren, and his sisters and brother, on the 26th of July, 2018.



Yad Vashem's Righteous Among the Nations medal.

The plaque was placed in the Garden of the Righteous at the Place de l'Iglese, next to the Catholic church. It will stand as a lasting tribute and gesture of our profound gratitude.

Often, as I look at my wife, three children, 10 grandchildren, and my three siblings and their families, I think that but for the bravery and selflessness of the good people of Arthès, we would not be here celebrating a dinner, a birthday, or any special occasion. My parents, my sister, and I would not have survived the war. I often reflect on my opportunities, my career as an architect, and the good and wonderful life I have led, personally and professionally. I am proud of the buildings I have designed to help make our community a better place to live - "Tikun Olam." I know how blessed I am to have my beautiful wife, Marilyn, at my side. I know the pride and joy of three caring children-Greg, an attorney for the federal government; David, an attorney and colonel in the United States Marine Corps Reserve; and Allison, an emergency medicine physician; and 10 incredible, amazing grandchildren.

I remind my children, grandchildren, and siblings that, but for the uncommon moral courage and heroic actions of the Dubecs and Igalens, they would not exist ... "Whoever saves a life, saves the whole universe."

I often ask myself, why? Why did they do it? Why did they put their lives at risk to save strangers, Jews?



Mike and his family with Michel Dubec, Marie-Helene Chamyou, and Jean-Pierre Igalens. In Arthes at the Righteous Among the Nations ceremony.

When asked this very question, Michel Dubec responded simply, "Because it was the right thing to do." At once a simple and profound answer. We can try to think back to that time - the Germans had defeated most of Europe and had begun their "final solution." The Vichy government was a willing accomplice to the Nazis regarding the "Jewish question." Regular French citizens went on with their lives. Suddenly, strangers appeared in small villages throughout France, villages like Arthès where if your family had not lived in the same house for 10 generations, you were a stranger. These

villagers had a power of life and death over the Jews who suddenly appeared in their midst.

Studying the faces of the Dubecs and Igalens and people of Arthès, my son remarked, "What strikes me about the bravery of the citizens of Arthès ... is the ordinariness of good ... they are not superheroes ... just a plumber, a housewife, a blacksmith ... ordinary, everyday, simple faces. The faces of bravery, of courage, of good."

Our teenage grandchildren understood this

and were impressed by the values and moral courage of people like the Dubecs and Igalens. My granddaughter, in an essay written for the Holocaust Commission's Elie Wiesel Writing Competition, eloquently stated, "stories from survivors often remind us of humanity's altruism, our ability to stand up for justice, our willingness to do the right thing, even in the most inexorable darkness ... they share the heroism and immortal courage of the righteous few who actively chose to uphold virtue and ethics during a time of blind moral collapse."

But our stories have not ended, and cannot end. They continue, they must continue, through our children, our grandchildren, and our grandchildren's children forever. In the unsettled world we live in today, it is now, more than ever, critical to honor and publicize the inherent good of people in the face of evil. The Dubecs and Igalens represent this ideal. •

*This excerpt of Michel Ashe's story is from **To Life: The Past is Present, Holocaust Stories of Hampton Roads Survivors, Liberators, and Rescuers** produced by the Holocaust Commission of the United Jewish Federation of Tidewater.*