

VINCENT PASCUCCI (France)

CLIP 1

My name is Pascucci. I am of Italian origin. I was born in Italy, in the region of Pesaro, at Sant'Angelo in l'Isola to be exact. That is a beautiful little hill, and as an adult, I once had the opportunity to see my birthplace again. My parents – first my father – came to France, thanks to an agreement concerning manual laborers that had been signed between France and Italy after World War I. These work contracts gave Italian antifascists the opportunity to leave Italy legally and escape imprisonment. I don't know the exact date of my fathers' emigration, but it took place between 1921 and 1922, as I was born in 1923. When I was six months old, my mother and I came to France to join my father. Since then I have lived in Nanterre. For almost 83 years now I have lived in Nanterre. My father was a Communist, an antifascist. He joined the French Communist Party as soon as we got French citizenship. He applied for naturalization in 1930, because it was very difficult for him to find work otherwise.

I went to school, "The Ecole Republique", in Nanterre. The school has now disappeared to make way for the University Paris X. I went to that school until the age of 13 and got my Elementary School Certificate- Certificat d'Etudes there. My teacher wanted me to continue school and to please him, I took an entry test for high school, but it was not my goal, because at the time my brother had just been born, my mother was not working because she had a heart disease. We needed to call the doctor very often and my father was only a worker, so we were not very rich. On one hand, I wanted to contribute to the family by working, and on the other hand, I wanted to be free. That was even more important to me. I wanted to be independent. So at the age of 14, I started working. That was in 1937/1938, during the first crisis, and unemployment was a big issue. As I had learned no trade, I did a little bit of everything. I worked in a toy factory; I also worked unloading the little boats on the Seine. I was not very picky about the work, as it was quite hard to find a job at the time.

CLIP 2

During the elections of 1935, the reactionary government of Nanterre had been replaced by a communist government. During the electoral campaign, there were always meetings in the various neighborhoods, often taking place in schools. These meetings were called "Le compte rendu des mandats". My father often took me along to them. That is how I participated at meetings for the legislative elections in which Waldeck Rocher won against the Comte De Fels.

My father also took me to my first demonstration. It was called the "Wall of the Confederates" in memory of the Paris Commune (1870/71). I still went to school at that time, as I remember meeting my teacher, a young socialist, at the demonstration.

I belonged to the Communist Youth Movement. There I was responsible for the distribution of the newspaper "l'Avantgarde" until the war, until the banning of the Communist Party.

The Communist Party was banned after the non-aggression treaty between Hitler and Stalin was signed. The treaty was seen very negatively by the population, and became subject of propaganda from the French government. So when distributing leaflets at the factory gates I was sometimes insulted by the workers.

CLIP 3

On September 3rd, 1939, there was the declaration of war. My father was mobilized as we had become French citizens. He was sent to the East, I don't even remember to what place exactly. But they did not even have weapons. Unfortunately, I lost my mother at that time and my father came back to take care of the family. During the time it took for him to come home my aunt and uncle, who lived next door, took care of us, my brother and me.

In 1940, when the danger of German occupation was imminent, my aunt wanted us to go to Southern France. So we got to know the so-called "débacle" – the total collapse – during our flight. We left by foot, pushing our suitcases on bikes. We left Nanterre and arrived in Le Mans, where the Germans caught up with us.

When the Germans got in front of us, we returned to Nanterre. The city was almost empty at the time. It was July and Nanterre had been occupied on June 14th, 1940. There were very few working factories. There I got back in touch with my comrades from the Communist Youth Movement and we started ... because this war and especially the collapse were... how could I best describe it? The people did not understand anything. They were suddenly imprisoned in a lead chamber, instead of a free country.

This happened in less than a month. The Nazis crossed the French border on May 10th, 1940 and on June 10th they were in Paris. Everybody was scared and tried to leave. Everyone felt lost in this situation, we did not understand how in this country of freedom, this country where we had everything we wanted, a self-sufficient country (its agriculture and its industry) suddenly there was nothing left; ration tickets, we were hungry, we were cold. Therefore we felt the need to explain to the people why we were in this situation. With this group of young people that we were able to assemble, those who had stayed in Nanterre or had come back, we produced posters with a children's printing set that we then pasted onto the walls. They would say: "Out With the Invaders." When we were able to get a duplicator, we started producing leaflets.

The resistance started to organize itself. We were in touch with other comrades on a higher level and created the Patriotic Youths Union. We had no weapons at the time, or if so, very few, as in Paris we were not able to benefit from the Allies' parachuting. And in Paris, contrary to the rest of the country, the Germans had demanded that everyone hand over their weapons to the French police, even their hunting rifles. So we had no weapons and our main activity consisted in explaining to the people what had happened and why we were now in this situation. Therefore we started producing the leaflets. Nowadays that may seem relatively banal, as we find leaflets in our mailboxes every day, but I would like to say the following: In Nanterre, there were several resistance groups that were slowly forming. We were the youngsters of the Communist Youth Movement, but we were separated from the adults in the Communist Party, for safety reasons. Some of them were arrested while distributing the leaflets. They were sentenced. There were two women who were both deported. One of them died during the deportation. I tell you this to explain that distributing these flyers or newspapers at the time was risking your life. Concerning the male resistant fighters, there were more than 15 arrests. We had not internalized the importance of organizing ourselves in the underground yet. Everyone knew each other. Nine of them were shot and the other eight died during the deportation to Auschwitz.

CLIP 4

About the organization: in the beginning, we all knew each other. And when the first people were arrested we realized we needed a new form of organization. This was not specific for Nanterre. We were not used to working or organizing ourselves undercover. The instruction we got from the direction of the Communist Youth or from the Communist Party was to organize in triangles. That meant we were to get together in groups of three comrades, so that in case of an arrest we could only give away two names under torture. One out of the three was responsible. So we formed a sort of spider web, with these groups of three, these triangles, on all levels of the organization. That was the structure of the clandestine organization of the Communist Party, which then applied to the French snipers and partisans.

We structured ourselves by regions and sectors. The regions were numbered (I was in region 7) and then there were the sectors. Our sector comprised three or four municipalities around Nanterre. One of our comrades had a big garage at his parent's house. There was a little pavilion where we installed our material. And with our manual duplicator, we produced leaflets. Our leaders gave us these announcements for resistance and we had to reproduce leaflets from them and then distribute them. We usually did that at night, which was very dangerous because there was a curfew from 22h00 until 6h00 in the morning and one was only allowed outside with an Ausweis (pass) issued by the police or by the Germans. It's strange when you think about it: nowadays our mailboxes are filled with advertisement, in those days we were risking our lives, risking being arrested, beaten and tortured, so that we talked. And many were used as hostages and shot. That was the case of the comrades, who I talked about before. They were simply shot as hostages after an event of the resistance. Those who say they were not afraid during that time, are either dumb or liars. Or they didn't do anything. As soon as you were active in the resistance, there was always the danger of being

arrested, with all the consequences. Our police headquarters' expertise, for example, was beating the foot soles of the people they arrested.

When we are now asked about day to day life, we answer that the whole French population, except for a minority that took advantage of the situation and did commerce on the black market, suffered from hunger. We explain that in those days we were allowed one little piece of bread a day, or 90 grams of meat a week, while nowadays students can get a chocolate croissant in the bakery across their school without a problem.

You needed to have a ration ticket; otherwise you were forced to buy on the black market. The Nazis had raided everything in France. As I said earlier, France had been self-sufficient because of their agriculture and industry. They took everything, all the machines, everything.

One could be part of the resistance movement and have a normal occupation as well. I worked in the Simca factory. That was an Italian enterprise. The director, Mr. Picosi, was Italian. They produced cars before the war. During the occupation, we were forced to produce axels for tanks. So we started sabotaging the machines during our work.

In the beginning of 1943, Hitler had begun to lose some battles. He lost the battle of Stalingrad, the battle in Libya. He had to mobilize his entire male population, as he had occupied almost all of Europe's countries. He had to figure out how to keep his war machinery, "die Kriegsmaschinerie", going. An agreement was signed between the French Pétain-Laval government and the German administration to create the so-called STO (Service du Travail Obligatoire – Forced Labor). In the beginning, they tried it with propaganda, saying that one worker going to work in Germany would liberate ten Prisoners of War. That didn't work very well, as very few volunteered. From then on lists were sent to the factories, lists with the names of some of the workers from that factory. If your name was on that list, you had to leave to work in Germany.

One day I saw my name on one of these lists. We were supposed to have a medical check-up in Courbevoie, with a German major. Let me tell you a little anecdote: I had a hernia, which in reality didn't bother me. But I arrived there as if doubled up in pain, saying that my doctor had told me I needed to be operated on immediately, as there was a big risk to my health. The major answered: "Don't worry. We have very good surgeons in Germany, so go ahead." I didn't say anything and then got in touch with my superiors. It was decided that I would be sent to a 'maquis' in Corèse. Upon arrival in Brives, I was to contact the comrades. When I passed the demarcation line and arrived in Brives, I was not able to establish contact, because the 'maquis' was under siege, after having derailed a German train filled with deportees. I had already been controlled several times by the police with my false identification documents and realized that the situation was getting dangerous. Therefore I returned to Nanterre and from there I was sent to work in a factory in the department of the Marne. The factory produced radar. One day a few comrades and I – we were producing concrete platforms – sent a concrete wagon into a German barrack. We did not wait for our wages... We left immediately and I returned to Nanterre where I stayed undercover. I had a little basement room. My father did not know where I was; he thought I had left for Germany, because, when the Nazis and Pétains police did not find the person they were looking for, they took their family along. I had no contact at all with my family until the liberation.

While I was undercover, we had very few weapons, a few hand arms. My task consisted in organizing an armed group to protect the person or the people who would go to some public place to distribute leaflets or hold a speech.

The only entertainment that was allowed at the time was going to the movies. Before the film itself they would show some news/information, written by the Nazis, the French police, the French government. That was when we intervened. We occupied the projectionists' cabin and the directors' office, so that he couldn't call the police, and one of our comrades, usually Louis Meunier, would get up and speak. It was our goal to ensure his safety. When we distributed leaflets, there was always an armed squadron as well, to protect the comrades in case the police appeared.

Slowly the population itself started doing the protecting. They would form groups that hindered the police from passing and would give us time to escape.

We had a certain amount of support in the population. In the beginning there was mostly fear.

When we handed out leaflets, the people would scatter as they were scared. Later on things changed.

When the police arrived, they would form groups to hinder the police from passing and would make it possible for us to escape.

We sometimes could help Prisoners of War to escape. In Nanterre, at the place of the current university, there was a camp called "aviation camp", that had been occupied by the Germans. It was used to recuperate material, like pieces of downed airplanes and there were Soviet prisoners working there. One day one of our comrades went to visit his wife in the hospital of Nanterre and was approached for a cigarette by a young POW that didn't speak any French. Our comrade told him to come back the following day with other clothes and we helped him escape. That was risky, but we took risks every day.

The young man is on that picture I showed you, along with Louis Meunier and me. He joined a 'maquis' but to our great regret we never found out what happened to him.

It happened very naturally. We had the possibility to help him escape, so we did. It was not worked out beforehand and at the time we did not know what happened to liberated Soviet POWs (they were often imprisoned in the USSR after their return).

CLIP 6

Louis Meunier and I were very close. I was also very close to his family. We knew each other before the war, from the times of the Communist Youth Movement. Our group did not only consist of young communists, but of young Catholics as well, or of people that hadn't been affiliated to any group and then joined us.

So he and I were very close and his death affected me enormously. Those of us that escaped were really very lucky. The day he was arrested by the Nazis, along with his father, we had separated just a quarter of an hour earlier.

The collaborating government, the mayor of the municipality, had already been arrested by the resistance and we were supposed to organize the take-over of the City Hall and the establishment of the Liberation Committee for the following day.

This all happened on August 20th 1944, so the Germans were still in Nanterre. Louis Meunier, his father and I had met to ensure the security of the event.

As I said earlier, we split. I went to meet two armed comrades, with whom I went to Pont Neully to meet the old mayor of Nanterre, Raymond Bardet, who was in the Résistance – he was one of the leaders of the resistance of the railroad workers - and to protect him during his return to the City Hall for the Council of the Liberation Committee on the following day.

So we separated, and while I left to perform my task, Louis Meunier and his father met one of the comrades that had been imprisoned on July 14th, 1940 and had just been liberated, as the prison guards had begun to open the doors of the prison and let the resistance fighters escape. They lost time on this encounter.

Then the last Germans that were exploding the equipment from the aviation camp before leaving passed by there and arrested them. They searched them and found the revolver I had given to Louis Meunier. He actually didn't like weapons, but I gave him one, telling him he needed it to be able to defend himself. They found his FFI (Forces Françaises à l'Interieur – the French Forces inside the country which was the resistance) bracelet as well.

The German officer told Louis Meunier to climb up to the roof of the barracks and take down the Allied flags, which firemen had placed there earlier. Louis refused and the German officer pulled his revolver to force him. His father offered to climb up in order to try to save his son's life. While climbing up he heard shots but he didn't see his son, who had been taken inside the barracks and shot there.

As there were two German trucks leaving for Mont Valérien, and the first one had already left, the father thought that his son had been transported on the first truck. He didn't know his son had been killed.

His family never blamed me, but I always wonder if things would have happened differently, had I not given him a revolver. I am afraid so.

It all had a big impact on me. I could have also been there, I would have been there with them had we not decided that I would go meet the comrades to get the mayor of Nanterre.

That goes to show you how thin the thread is that life hangs on. Just a little bit of luck.

CLIP 7

Nanterre was liberated on the following day, August 21st, 1944. The German officers all left for Mont Valérien, the only place they felt safe, and the Liberation Committee was installed. Mont Valérien is a fort from the time before the Paris Commune and it was there that the resistance fighters were shot. Each time the resistance had organized an attack against the German troops. General Stüplinen ordered, that for every German killed, one hundred resistance fighters should be executed. We were able to identify 1015 corpses of people that had been shot between 1941 and 1944. It was an execution place.

The Germans couldn't move anymore, as all the streets leading there were barricaded by the resistance. There had been some Germans in the Paris water works, as they had intended to blow up the water basins, but they were caught. So there was a prisoner exchange between those Germans and the last prisoners the Germans had taken, and had no nerve to shoot. That is how we found out exactly what had happened to Louis Meunier.

Back to the Nazis in Mont Valérien: They refused to give themselves up to the resistance. One of them said they would only give themselves up to the regular army. So our commander went to see Colonel Rémy from the Leclerc Division, who had been quarantined in the Bois de Boulogne with his brigade. So Colonel Rémy went up to the fort and that is when they gave themselves in.

I didn't have much time to enjoy the liberation. During the transition period, I was responsible for the security of Raymond Barbet, who was one of the people responsible for the resistance of the railroad workers. He had organized the insurrection-strike of the railroad workers on August 10th, 1944, which had sparked the nation-wide insurrection. I was responsible for his safety, as there were still collaborators and other dangers lurking.

I myself went up to the fort only on August 28th, August 29th. We were organized militarily and as I had obtained the rank of lieutenant in the resistance. I was given a section of 50 resistance fighters. We called it the Louis Meunier section in his memory.

What I felt at the liberation? Well, a lot of joy! It was like a big party. Even those who hadn't done anything or maybe even taken advantage of the situation now called themselves resistance fighters. It was a huge joy to be liberated and to have liberated France, even though it wasn't quite over. Alsace-Lorraine was still occupied by the Germans, there was still the submarine basis in the enclave of La Rochelle. But really it was a liberation.

We had the satisfaction of saying that we had won, that we had gone through with it.

Not all of the comrades that had been in the group with us joined the army afterwards, some for personal reason. But we had committed ourselves for the duration of the entire war. I continued because I wanted to avenge Louis. At his funeral we had sworn that we would avenge him. That meant to go through with it and fight the Nazis until the end.

CLIP 8

I did not start immediately as a witness. Even though I was a member of the Association of former resistance fighters, I had other political responsibilities.

I had joined the French Communist Party in 1943, when it was still clandestine, and as now we had a shortage of people, I took on some political responsibilities on a local level. So I would attend the annual meetings of the former resistant fighters association, but I was not an active member.

Quite some time later, when the president of the association passed away, friends of mine pushed me into the presidency saying: "You were so active during the resistance; you were responsible for the liberation of Nanterre together with Louis Meunier, etc..."

To quote Bertolt Brecht: "the lap of the repulsive beast is still fertile"; we had not and have not totally liberated ourselves from fascism, and therefore we felt the need to inform and to act.

In school history books, there was very little information about the time: General De Gaulle's speech and the Shoah. That is very important, but it is not enough to explain to young students the complexity of World War II and what had happened in France. We were asked by history teachers to talk about our experience in class.

We thought it was important to do even more and started organizing school trips to different memorials, the places where Nazi crimes were committed. We organized school trips to

Oradour s/Glane, to Struthof, the only Nazi concentration camp there was in France, in Alsace. We took classes of three different schools to Auschwitz-Birkenau. The message we want to get through to young people is to show them the atrocities of racism and xenophobia, the total absence of freedom. During these meetings we talk with the students, answer their questions etc. There are several of us. One comrade, Lucien Ducastel had been deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. We also do this in memory of our comrades who died in Auschwitz. Today more than ever it is necessary to do this work, because in Europe there is a rise of communitarism and a dangerous rise of fascism. Let us remember that Hitler got to power legally and that nowadays, there a few European countries that have a right-extremist government. It might seem pretentious but we think we have not finished our work and that we need to explain and talk to young people, guide them for the future, show them the importance of being brotherly. I don't answer all their questions. When they ask me how many Germans I killed I won't answer that question. I don't think it is really interesting. I try to explain that during the war there is one essential rule: if I don't shoot first, he will shoot me. He didn't do anything to me and I didn't do anything to him. I don't know him. He has a family; I have a family as well. Why then, do we kill each other? Why? That is what we have to ask ourselves. Why? Because the ones that decide to wage war, are not the ones that fight it.

CLIP 9

Yes, our life was very difficult. But we had made a choice. We could just as well have put up our feet and watched TV. But we didn't make that choice. I can't explain exactly why. I think on one hand, it was thanks to the way my parents educated me. As soon as I was old enough to understand, they told me what Italian fascism was. And then it was thanks to the teachers in school, especially my last one. I have very fond memories of him. He embedded in us the principles of loyalty, taught us what it meant to be a citizen, to be someone who took on responsibilities and acted in life.

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