

Marine Le Pen and the French Role in Roundups of Jews

by Michael Curtis



It is bewildering that on the eve of Passover, the story of Jewish liberation from slavery, the far right candidate for the French presidency should have reopened old wounds concerning the treatment of Jews in France in World War II. It raises the question, will the real Marine Le Pen stand up? Did she show her true colors by her surprising remarks on April 9, 2017 which raise the possibility she had not fully removed herself from the racist outlook of her father as she has been suggesting?

For months Marine Le Pen has tried to differentiate herself from her father Jean-Marie Le Pen who founded her party, the Front National in 1972, and attempted to soften the image of the party. Jean-Marie has disgraced himself, among other issues, by antisemitic remarks. The most infamous of them was that the Holocaust was “a detail of history,” for which he was fined 30,000 euros in a Paris court in April 2016. Other members of FN perpetuate a similar point of view. Benoit Loeuillet, FN regional councillor in the region of Provence held “I don’t think there were that many (Jewish) deaths. There weren’t six million.” He has been temporally suspended from the party.

Marine Le Pen has constabtly asserted her differences on this issue and denied she is in any way antisemitic. She has even argued that the FN is a shield for Jews against Islamic extremists. Yet on April 9, exactly a year after her father’s punishment, and without any particular reason, she commented on what is generally regarded as the worst act of French

officials in Occupied Paris during World World II. This was the Velodrome d'Hiver (Vel d'Hiv) roundup on July 16-17, 1942, the mass arrest of more than 13,000 Jews, men, women, and children. The venue was an indoor sporting arena, with a cycling track, in the 15th *arrondissement* of Paris. In it there were no arrangements for food, water, or sanitary facilities, and little space for people to lie down.

Most of those arrested were transported to the Drancy transit camp and then deported to Auschwitz and murdered. The Vel d'Hiv roundup was part of a larger roundup, *Operation Vent printanier* (Operation spring wind) throughout France in 1942. This was part of the Nazi policy to deport Jews from France and other countries.

But among the planners of the Vel d'Hiv operation was Rene Bousquet, secretary general of the French national police, with control of the police in both the Occupied and Unoccupied zones of France. The director of the local Paris police force was Emile Hennequin who gave instructions to the police prefecture three days before the arrests. The event was supposed to occur on July 13-15 , that included Bastille Day, but the Germans allowed the operation to be delayed three days.

Though the Nazis organized the roundups, French people were responsible for their execution of the policy. It was the French police who did the arresting. Of those arrested, 6000 were sent immediately to Drancy to be deported. The rest went to the Vel d'Hiv.

French police carried out the arrests and guarded those arrested, until they were transported to concentration camps and death camps. In all, 76,000 Jews perished, the majority in Auschwitz.

The Nazis originally had agreed to exempt children under the age of 16 from arrest, but it was French Prime Minister Pierre

Laval who held that for "humanitarian" reasons the children should be arrested with their parents, and 3,625 children were among those arrested and sent to their death.

Prime Minister Laval was arrested after the war, and shot by firing squad in October 1945. The police chief Rene Bousquet was sentenced in 1949 for his role in the Vichy regime. However, the sentence was commuted for "having actively and sustainably participated in the resistance against the occupier." But, after revelations of the extent of his wartime activity, Bousquet, who had been protected by his friend Francois Mitterand, whose own war time role remains ambiguous, was in 1991 indicted for his participation in the deportation of Jews. Bousquet was assassinated on June 8, 1993 by a mentally ill individual, before he came to trial.

For some bizzare reason Marine Le Pen asserted; "I dont think France is responsible for Vel d'Hiv..I think that generally speaking if there are people responsible, it's those who were in power at the time. It's not France." In this view she is not alone. Francois Mitterand in 1992, who still sent flowers to the grave of Vichy leader Marshal Petain, refused to acknowledge French responsibility for deportation of Jews. In 1994 he still argued that the republic had nothing to do with that, "France is not responsible."

Other French leaders, Jacques Chirac and Francois Hollande have asserted otherwise. Chirac was the first official to denounce the moral abdication of the Vichy regime for its cooperation with the Nazis in arrests, round ups, and deportation of Jews. On July 16, 1995, the anniversary of Vel d'Hiv, Chirac spoke of the criminal insanity of the occupying power which was assisted by the French, by the French state. On that day Chirac said, France delivered those she was protecting to their executioners. President Hollande said Vel d'Hiv was a crime committed in France, by France, against French values and principles.

After her statement Marine Le Pen attempted to soften her position. She said, in a statement that is partially accurate and misleading, "Like Charles de Gaulle and Francois Mitterand, I consider that France and the Republic were in London during the Occupation. The Vichy regime was not France." More correct is that the National Front is inheriting the legacy of Vichy. The FN is not France.