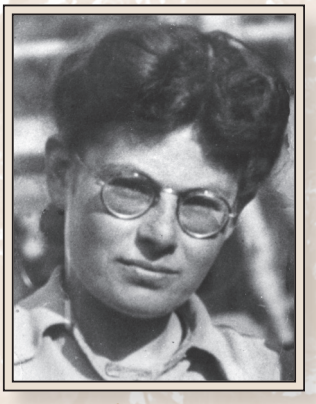
Marianne Cohn: Uncovering a Life



Marianne Cohn

One of the joys for a writer in doing research is finding a fragment, the germ of what you believe could be a great story. But then the challenge at that moment is whether you will be able to find other information that will lead you to the bigger story — to uncovering a life — to a larger theme.

My journey learning about twenty-two-year-old Marianne Cohn, who smuggled Jewish children from occupied France to safety in Switzerland and lost her life doing so, began with three pages in a book. The book, *Jewish Resistance in France, 1940–1944*, was written by Anny Latour, herself a French Jewish resister. I immediately knew that this young woman, Marianne Cohn, was an example of the people I write about — "the extraordinary ordinary people" who find themselves at a particular moment in history and assume a mantle of responsibility and danger they never imagined for themselves.

I decided to find out more about her. The three pages of information were the beginning of my quest to make Cohn's act of courage come alive. In my writing, I could not put words in her mouth, nor could I make up her feelings. I was writing nonfiction, not historical fiction. Every word had to be historically accurate.

In speeches, I always caution my audience to be aware of both the value of Wikipedia and the inaccuracies and incompleteness of many of the reports there and on websites in general. But it's equally true that the Internet leads us to sources and people we would most likely never find without traveling from place to place, from archive to archive. On the Internet I found a newsletter, *Mishpocha!*, one of thousands of Holocaust newsletters and memoirs in which people who do not write books share their lives. *Mishpocha* means "family," in this instance, the family of Jews.

There I found a photograph of Marianne Cohn. The camera caught her sweetness, innocence, lack of self-consciousness, and intensity. Her simple white blouse buttoned down the front with a collar was the kind of blouse I wore all through high school and in college. She looked like a lot of my friends looked when they were twenty-two. She looked like I looked then.

There also was an article by Helen Koenig Stein, who was one of the children Marianne helped to escape. Stein recounted being captured, imprisoned, and interrogated by the Gestapo at age fourteen: *"My heart was pounding. I saw two Nazis, one sitting on a desk with a revolver pointed towards me and the other in front of a typewriter with a whip. He asked my name, my parents' address, who organized the journey, who provided the false papers. After each question, he said, 'Are you Jewish?' I was in turmoil and undecided of what to say or not say."*

My own heart pounded thinking about the thousands of kids like Helen Koenig Stein who were interrogated and who witnessed or heard people being tortured or were tortured themselves. I remain amazed at how these children survived and went on to build new lives. These children are heroes, too, along with the young people like Marianne Cohn who gave up their lives to save them.

Continuing my search, I scoured the catalogs of major Holocaust and Jewish libraries and compiled a list of books by historians who specialized in the French Jewish underground. Here and there in their books were bits and pieces about Cohn and her Zionist comrades that helped me reconstruct her journey from Mannheim, Germany, to France.

Understanding how dangerous Hitler was, her parents had emigrated with their daughters to Spain and then to France in 1938. In France they were rounded up with other "enemy aliens" and sent to an internment camp. Her sister disappeared from the story at that point, and I never discovered how Marianne found her way to a Jewish Scout farm in the south of France. But there she joined a new family of courageous young Zionists dedicated to risking their lives so Jewish children would survive.

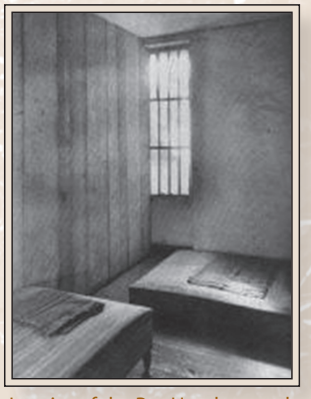
Marianne Cohn

I searched for more photographs of her. The joy of using the Internet was confirmed as I easily maneuvered through the photo archives of the U.S. Holocaust Museum and Yad Vashem. I did find another photo — in this one, her joy and smile are infectious, as if she doesn't have a care in the world. I also found photos of many of the children she and another courier, Mila Racine, saved and learned that Racine died on one smuggling operation. A photo caption confirmed the kindness and

courage of the mayor of Annemasse and a parish priest who protected Jewish children many times — feeding them, encouraging them, lying for them. It saddened me that I could not travel to Annemasse and promised myself that I would someday.

Children who survived the war thanks to Marianne Cohn, Mila Racine, and Jean Deffaugt, August 18, 1944

I continued the search for photos, wanting to see where Marianne and the children were jailed. My editor, Mary Lee Donovan, who is equally tenacious, triumphed where I could not and found a photograph of the narrow, stark cells that imprisoned Marianne and the children. From Helen Stein's article, I knew that the children saw the results of Marianne being tortured: *"Partisans were being tortured, and we heard their screams. . . . Marianne was taken away every day for questioning and tortured. She came back, her face red and swollen. She was subjected to hot and cold baths. She was courageous and did not betray her contacts."*



Interior of the Pax Hotel–turned prison

The Maquis, the French resistance, offered to help Marianne escape, but she would not abandon the children, seventeen of whom were under fourteen and one of whom was only three. She knew they would be murdered in reprisal if she escaped. She also knew that the children would be frightened if she died while they were all jailed, so she wanted to leave them something that would give them strength. She wanted them to know that she had not betrayed them and that they had the courage not to betray others. In her last few days, she turned to the written word, one of the great strengths of the Jewish people, and wrote a poem for the children:

You Do Not Know the Extent of My Courage

I will betray tomorrow, not today.
Today, tear off my fingernails.
I will not betray!
You do not know the extent of my courage.
I know.
You are five hands, harsh and full of rings.
You are wearing hob-nailed boots.

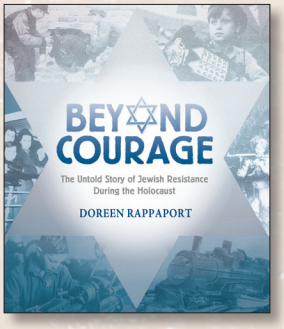
I will betray tomorrow. Not today,
Tomorrow.
I need the night to make up my mind.
I need at least one night
to disown, to abjure, to betray.
To disown my friends,
to abjure bread and wine,
to betray life,
and to die.

I will betray tomorrow. not today.
The file is under the windowpane.
The file is not meant for the torturer.
The file is not meant for the executioner.
The file is for my wrists.

Today, I do not have anything to say.
I will betray tomorrow.

In uncovering Marianne Cohn's life, I discovered and affirmed an important theme of my book — that courage is a quality we can all live regardless of our age or situation.

On July 8, 1944, Marianne Cohn and three members of the Maquis were dragged out of the jail and murdered. Other Maquis were soon able to rescue the children. Today, there are memorials to Marianne Cohn in both France and Germany.



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