

Chapter 9 – Le Cimetière vieux

(The Old Cemetery)

Since the last town election, ideological posters have been regularly displayed in all four corners of the city. This time, the announcement is more forceful. On the poster: A GUN. Underneath, a slogan: "NOW THE MUNICIPAL POLICE HAS A NEW FRIEND". Georges Antoine Viillard is deeply concerned. How can we confuse the values of violence and friendship? How can one dare to give a soul to a weapon in public? Georges Antoine continues his way to the old cemetery. From afar, his silhouette at the end of the day is magnified by the shadow of a violin.

Through graveyard alleys, he takes a musical walk to the sound of Klezmer. For him, playing this tune is a real pleasure which always mixes contrasting feelings of melancholy, serenity and amazement at the discovery of the graves. The calm is disturbed by the instruments' slow and soft tempo. That evening the musician also has a faithful rendezvous with two men: Raymond and Adrien, who have helped him to become what he is.

This place, like the Haussmannian buildings of the Paul Riquet Alleys, bears witness to the intermittent winegrowing city prosperity since the Belle Époque. Along the lanes, this place allows you to discover splendid tombs representative from different artistic movements: Belle Époque of the neo-Gothic period, Art Nouveau of the early 20th century, then Arts Déco of the 1920s-1940s. This Jewish music from the Balkans, the Klezmer, is the heir of the gypsy and Turkish music, Georges Antoine plays it by adapting its tempo with delicacy, to the heterogeneous beauty and the melancholy of the place. Some monuments fascinate him and others move him. One feels at ease in this setting as if the violin densifies the calm and plays with the graves. The sky blazes and turns red with the sunset. Clouds, pushed by the Greek wind, strangely draw the cemetery towards the heavens. Its true place perhaps.

If rich people were able to take advantage of the great sculptor's genius: Injalbert, Villeneuve, Magrou, Louis Paul, to erect true works of art, others were able to remain more discreet. Georges Antoine stays away from pomp and circumstance monuments. On his violin, two red rosebuds are placed near the pegs at the head of the instrument. This is his habit. Red is a bright colour he likes, it is visible and symbolises emotion and struggle. A Rose-represents love and is the queen of flowers. He moves to a more modest place. He stops playing and tenderly places the first bud on Raymond's grave. He meditates for a moment. Then he moves a little further, with the same ritual, and puts the second one on Adrien's grave. The two graves are separated by a bucolic avenue with beautiful cypress trees. On Raymond's grave, an epitaph borrowed from Paul Eluard reads: "I marvel at the unknown, like you! On Adrien's, a discreet Star of David accompanies 'Deiner Lieb vergess ich nimmer'.

Adrien was the paediatrician who, one day in 1942, in an emergency and despite the bans, helped Georges Antoine's mother to give birth to him. As for Raymond, also a doctor, he is Georges Antoine's maternal grandfather.

Their common story is set in a tragic context, that of the terrible year 1942. Until November 11, Béziers was in the free zone and was home to a large population of refugees, especially Jewish refugees. The German invasion caused a great exodus from Holland, Belgium and all corners of France. Alsations like Adrien's family were numerous. Before the war, Béziers had only 4 or 5 Jewish families known as such. They were shopkeepers. There was a large shop, Lévy, and a shoe shop, Bénatar. They were all assimilated, for the most part republican and secular. Adrien's family, after a trying journey, arrived from Strasbourg and settled in Béziers, avenue Foch. Adrien practised medicine there. There, he quickly built up a local clientele alongside children from Jewish families who had taken refuge from Paris, Lille and Alsace. He was authorised to treat foreign Jewish families, Staatenlose¹, from the prison camp in Agde. He practised paediatrics with children until the Vichy government definitively forbade him from any medical activity. On the other side of the avenue lived Raymond, a

¹ No nationality whatsoever

surgeon at the hospital and occasionally doctor at the prison. Raymond and Adrien often met and liked each other. They had other things in common. First of all, music: one played piano and the other violin. They also liked to tell jokes. They also shared the same reading of the Hippocratic Oath, in particular this sentence: "I will intervene to protect people if they are vulnerable or threatened in their integrity or dignity". These few words led them to take considerable risks and to uphold their profession honour. In chorus, their eyes sparkling like children, they liked to quote Louis Pasteur's famous phrase: "I ask you neither your race, nor your religion, nor your country, but only what is your evil." For them, racism and anti-Semitism are evil. So jointly they broke the law. They issued false certificates to prolong a hospitalisation or to forbid the transfer of a prisoner. In secrecy, they treated wounded maquisards, gave shelter to night fighters, and helped them escape to Spain. In Béziers prison, Raymond managed to treat all his patients with the same dedication, although authorities tried to deprive some prisoners of care. In the hospital, he hides Jewish children with false papers to keep them safe from the outside world.

During that terrible year of 1942, Pierre Laval² agreed to hand over 10,000 Jews living in the free zone to the Germans. Each department had to provide its quota, and the Hérault was not exempt. In August, Raymond learnts from his contacts in prison that the police authorities were going to carry out a vast round-up of Jews in Béziers. Raymond warned Adrien who in turn warned the whole community. He suggested that Adrien, his wife and their two children take refuge in his house without further delay. A few hours later, when the police burst into Adrien's house, they found no one there. However, this solution was only temporary. Raymond could not keep four people in his house without attracting attention. The situation became even more dangerous when Germans occupied-the entire south of France in November. Raymond arranged to have his protégés secretly moved to Aix-les-Bains, which was under Italian control at the time. There, this town was less subject to persecution. He continued to look after Adrien's family property after their departure, taking care to hide their

² Head of government

belongings so that they did not fall into the Germans hands or the French police. When liberation times came, Adrien returned with his family. They found their property and settled permanently in Béziers, to Raymond's great joy. Real life began and hopes for freedom and progress were reborn. It was during this last post-war period that Georges Antoine grew up and awoke. Without a father, he transferred all his affection to his grandfather and his friend. They taught him music and the trio, formed by the two old men and the young one, got into the habit of playing together. Gypsy jazz was a genre created in France under the influence of big bands and bal musette. The instruments change and intertwine. A piano and violin are joined by an accordion, clarinet and bass guitar. All songs from the Hot Club de France Quintet are played. Django Reinhardt, Stéphane Grappelli, Gus Viseur, and Matelo Ferret are their idols. Adrien taught them to play Klezmer, sometimes with tears. And then, during the breaks, they told each other jokes. Jokes in which self-mockery was always present and mixed with wordplay, wisdom and wit. In this universe, Georges Antoine's attachment to his accomplices is reflected in a strong attraction to medicine.

The two men and medicine are so intertwined that little Georges Antoine's feelings are mixed with love, admiration, tenderness and fascination. This grandfather, with his musketeer-like appearance, knife-edge profile, fine moustache, full eyebrows and eyes crinkled with an eternal benevolent smile, lives in him, as does his friend Adrien, who always **made** him laugh with his Jewish jokes.

Today, in front of their graves, he laughs, laughs inside, thinking of the good jokes he has retained a little at random from his memory:

"An old Jew dies and meets God when he gets to heaven. He takes stock of his life:

- The worst thing that happened to me was when my son converted to Christianity," he says.

- Me, too," God replies.

- And what did you do?

- A New Testament!

A moment later, Georges Antoine took up his violin with a smile on his face. Then he leaves the Old Cemetery. He walks to his home, indifferent this time to the town posters.

At the street end, he thinks he recognises the walker close to him, that woman he knew in hospital: the poor lady from the Poet's Park. She moves away.

Back in the Avenue Foch, in the family flat, once he has gone to bed, George Antoine falls deeply asleep. In his dreams, he still hears the Klezmer sounding in the cemetery. Music continues at a crescendo and magically and calls all the freedom lovers to leave their graves. Then, the dead rise joyfully and a procession forms with Raymond and Adrien in the lead. They walk towards the heart of the city, dressed in their beautiful funeral costumes. Music, now more solemn, precedes the march. Streets and buildings are gradually lit up.

That night, the dead parade to help the living chase away the returning wolves.

*"Attracted by the smell of blood
There came a thousand and one
To make a fuss, jubilation and bombast
In this damn country of France
Until men found again
Love and brotherhood... then³ "*

*"Attirés par l'odeur du sang
Il en vint des mille et des cents
Faire carouss', liesse et bombance
Dans ce foutu pays de France
Jusqu'à c'que les hommes aient retrouvé
L'amour et la fraternité... alors"*

³ The Wolves Have Entered Paris – Famous Song from *Serge Reggiani*

Death and remembrance have many virtues, notably that of resurrection or revival. It brings us back to the essential.

To take time to be with death, means to love life and its freedom.