

The Blue Jerboa¹

1959 - A pivotal year for Paul. He was 20 years old, and he did not want to do his military service in Algeria. He knew what that meant... His family remembered the 1945 massacres in Sétif. The armed occupation of a territory, whatever shape it took, was something he did not want to experience. His father had been arrested by the Gestapo in 1943 in Tulle, and deported to Buchenwald. His whole childhood had been filled with stories of the war, the struggles, the resistance, and the massacres perpetrated in Tulle and Oradour. By a huge stroke of luck, his application for work in the non military field had been accepted. With his teaching experience he was sent to Arak, near Tamanrasset, to prepare for the new school term. There were no French authorities in this area. He would be the only representative. And a single class of seven children awaited his arrival.

¹ Blue Jerboa: Small rodent found in Africa's Steppes and deserts, with a long tail and long hind legs, which moves with a hopping motion.

As soon as he arrived in Arak, Paul did his best to show that he had nothing to do with the military. Donning the grey jacket, white shirt and black tie, he ensured that he mainly based his teaching on Saharan society: its geography, its climate, its flora and fauna, and its social interactions with the rich diversity of trades followed. It was true that he spoke excellent French, but as soon as he was able he took care to finish his sentences in Berber, having learnt the language very quickly. For his oldest pupils, he would speak of Darwin and of Théodore Monod, a Frenchman famous for his studies of the desert. And he would refer to Tierno Bokar, a Muslim wise man whose preachings he recalled: "The best beings will be those amongst us that are raised in love, charity and respect for others".

The children greatly appreciated his rigour and his good humour. He had set up a sleeping area away from the wind and sand for nap time, a shower and dry toilets, and created a small vegetable garden with the daily help of the pupils. After a few months, there were tomatoes, peppers, chillies, aubergines, vines, millet, cucumbers and even cabbages. Paul spent his spare time doing odd jobs. Tins became maracas or string telephones, bottles became xylophones. Everyone at the school had their own musical instrument.

As the days went by he melted into Arak's Saharan society, passing time with small groups to share tea

and smoke kif leaves. He did not say much, but he smiled a lot and that was appreciated. He could often be seen on his own, writing. One day, he swapped his jacket for the saroual and the djellaba. It was not commented on. And, strangely, the French authorities had other things on their minds.

All the same, one day the French police came in force into the village. Having made a few pointed remarks about Paul's clothes and long hair, the sergeant gathered together the few locals who were present. He was recruiting workers for a site under construction at Reggane in the Tanezrouft region further north. They were planning to build a 100 metre-high tower. The police left empty-handed.

And then, a few weeks later in February 1960, the village headman sought Paul out to tell him to leave immediately: "The fellaghas² are looking for you. They want to kill you as pay-back for military and police brutality!" Paul was stunned by this but, despite it all, he decided to stay - much to the headman's dismay, who repeated that they were going to kill him.

The following morning was the 13th of February 1960. Silently, three fellaghas had made their way to where Paul was teaching. In silence, they took him from his classroom along with the frightened pupils, and they tied his hands behind his back and dragged

² Fellaghas: Partisan fighters for Algerian independence (1954-1962)

him out to a little square. There, one of the fellaghas brandished a dagger... Suddenly, from all around, there came the sound of doors opening and slamming shut, and villagers emerged, men and women. The headman was the first to approach and, in a voice resonant with authority, said: "That's enough, he's ours. Let him go - he's our brother!" Under pressure from the crowd, the fellaghas left, vowing to return. But destiny was to decide otherwise...

On that same day, towards midday, the desert wind brought an immense cloud of fire that engulfed Arak, burning everything and everyone alive...

The first French atom bomb³ had just been detonated at the Reggane nuclear site in the middle of the Sahara. This bomb, placed on a metal tower, had a power of 70 kilotons - four times more powerful than that dropped on Hiroshima.

Le Parisien newspaper, 14/02/2014: *"This map sends shivers down one's spine. Classified for decades as a defence secret by the French army, it has just been declassified as part of the legal action inquiry launched by the veterans of French nuclear tests (in the Sahara in the early 60s, then in*

³ Blue Jerboa is also the name given to the first French nuclear bomb experience

Polynesia in the 70s). For the first time, the public is becoming aware of the exact extent of the radioactive fallout resulting from the nuclear tests carried out by France in the Algerian Sahara. On this map, which we are publishing today for the first time, the calculations made by the French army show that, far from being confined to desert areas, the fallout covered the whole of North Africa, even including Sub-Saharan areas. It is noted that thirteen days after France launched its first aerial bomb, the famous Blue Jerboa, radioactive fallout had reached the Spanish coast and covered half of Sicily!"

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