

Memories of the 'Exodus' in Le Havre

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June 1940 is remembered by the French as the month when they lost the war and when millions of people in the north of France took to the roads to escape the advance of the German army. This is known as the 'exode' or 'exodus' in English. Sally Palmer's paper, 'Gritou and Annie Vallotton; Refugees, Reality and Radicalisation', shows the results of this exodus in eastern France. Our two papers shows that there was no one experience of June 1940 for the French. In Le Havre, on the Channel coast, the French were not just running away from the consequences of the end of the war, they were actually experiencing the battle itself.

The exodus for the people of Le Havre was more the result of a bungled evacuation process than a simple desire to flee. The resulting nightmare, which will be described below, became for Le Havre's inhabitants the touchstone of everything to be feared from evacuation. The memory of June 1940 remained strong in people's minds until the end of the Occupation. Over a thousand people died in the catastrophic bombing of Le Havre during September 1944 when civilians were not evacuated from the town. The memory of June 1940 has since been displaced by the memory of September 1944. Since that date people have remembered the fear of not being evacuated.

There is no one authoritative account of what happened in Le Havre in June 1940. A local author, Julien Guillemard, kept a diary throughout the Occupation which was later published.² For the month in question he also includes an account written for him by Léon Druart, the deputy director of the local electricity plant; an account from a naval officer; and a report written by Gaston Beaussart, a member of the local town council.³ Max Bengtsson, a teenager in Le Havre during the Occupation, later wrote a memoir of that period.⁴ In addition to his own memories of June 1940 he uses a piece he simply says is 'an extract from archives'.⁵ This contains no indication of what archives or who the author is but

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2 Guillemard, J., *L'enfer du Havre 1940-1944* (Rouen: Editions L'Écho des Vagues, 2010).

3 Ibid., pp. 44-57.

4 Bengtsson, M., *Le Havre: Les Années Noires 1939-1944* (Le Havre: Imprimerie Grenet, 1997).

5 Ibid., pp. 39-42.

reads like an official report, perhaps from a local policeman or council official. A history of Le Havre from its beginnings up to the 1980s has a brief account of June 1940,⁶ and two historians based in Le Havre, John Barzmann and Claude Malon, have also written short accounts of the bombing of Le Havre in June 1940.⁷ What follows is an attempt to extract a coherent series of events from these sources.

At first, the people of Le Havre, like Gritou and Annie Vallotton in eastern France, saw refugees arriving by train. But in Le Havre, these refugees were not French but Belgian and Dutch, and they were arriving in wave after wave fleeing westwards, away from the German troops who had already occupied their countries.⁸ The signs were there that the German were winning the war. To accompany these presages of doom were the air raid warnings that started to sound at night and the deafening noise of anti-aircraft fire that the British troops launched at the Luftwaffe invading overhead.⁹

The first air battle between the British and Germans over Le Havre was the night of the 19th May, and it continued for the next two nights.¹⁰ In evidence were the Stuka aircraft, the dive-bombing planes of the Luftwaffe, written about by Matthew Powell in his paper, 'The RAF Must Fly the Flag'.

Le Havre was, and still is, France's second largest port, lining the northern bank of the Seine as it empties out into the Channel. The British troops fired their anti-aircraft guns from the port as the Luftwaffe rained down bombs on Le Havre's quaysides, its basins, its huge warehouses where most of France's imports of cotton, wood, and coffee were unloaded; its hundreds of factories that processed the raw materials that arrived there by ship; its shipbuilders and repairers; and the town itself with its closely packed neighbourhoods of dockers and factory workers who served the needs of this enormous hive of industry.

The bombing began again at the start of June whilst British troops were being evacuated from Dunkirk. This evacuation could not rescue all the British forces. Thousands of British troops were still in France and they started gathering in the Channel ports in order to be evacuated.

6 Corvisier, A. (ed.), *Histoire du Havre et d'estuaire de la Seine* (Toulouse: Privat, 1987), pp. 247–8.

7 Barzman, J., 'Les acteurs du transport portuaire, 1939-1945: notes sur le cas havrais', in Polino, M-N. (ed.), *Transports dans la France en guerre 1939-1945* (Rouen: Publications des universités de Rouen et du Havre, 2007), p. 402; Malon, C., *Occupation, épuration, reconstruction: Le monde de l'entreprise au Havre (1940-1950)* (Rouen: Publications des universités de Rouen et du Havre, 2012), pp. 49–51.

8 Bengtsson, p. 26; Guillemard, p. 31–2.

9 Bengtsson, p. 25; Guillemard, p. 30.

10 Corvisier, p. 247.

The Luftwaffe were ordered to make sure these other evacuations were not the success the Dunkirk operation had been. Le Havre was bombed again — ten bombing raids this time — throwing the town into chaos.¹¹

At the beginning of June there seemed to be some kind of plan to protect the people of Le Havre. On 6 and 7 June those living closest to the port were evacuated. On 8 June the hospitals started to remove those patients who could walk. They were to leave that evening on trains headed for Brittany. However, before that could happen news arrived that trains were no longer passing through Rouen. This meant, in effect, that no trains could leave Le Havre as they had to pass through Rouen to go anywhere else. At the same time conflicting reports were coming in of where the German army was — each one sited them as being that bit nearer to Le Havre.¹²

To add to the confusion, on the morning of Sunday 9 June, the oil refineries on the edge of Le Havre were ordered by the French military to be destroyed so that their fuel did not end up in German hands.¹³ It had the effects of a solar eclipse, plunging the town into darkness and sending the temperature plummeting. The townspeople felt that some kind of apocalypse had befallen them and they sought in desperation to leave the town.¹⁴

Any plans the authorities already had regarding evacuation had to be ripped up and started again. What happened next is confused in the sources, reflecting the confusion that reigned at the time. However, it seems that on that Sunday morning the mayor met with Admiral Gaudin de Villaille, who was the town major (*Commandant d'armes*). Together they decided that those workers in reserved occupations, and their families, would be transported by the military authorities to the other side of the Seine. Meanwhile people working in the public services would have to stay at their posts. The rest of the population would have to find their own way out, but would be helped as much as possible by the local authorities.

One eyewitness claims that the mayor had posters put up ordering that the town be evacuated but that Admiral Gaudin de Villaille had them ripped down and had new ones put up ordering those working in the public services to stay at their posts.¹⁵ However, another says that posters were put up with evacuation orders but that no one knew from whom the orders came. These posters laid out the provisions made for

11 http://www.historyofwar.org/articles/operation_cycle.html (accessed 17.5.15).

12 Bengtsson, p. 39.

13 Malon, p. 49.

14 This is described in all the sources.

15 Guillemard, p. 47.

the workers in reserved occupations; informed the population that lorries would be made available to transport people out of the town; and that public services had to remain in place. These services were specified as those supplying electricity, gas and water, the telephone and post office.¹⁶

As it turned out, those working in the specified public services all abandoned their posts and there was no special transportation for the workers in reserved occupations. Instead a lifeboat took the mayor and his team, the heads of department at the town hall, most of the town's councillors and the sub-prefect across the Seine, on the orders of the Home Secretary. At least the promised transport appeared; articulated lorries and refuse trucks carted people out of town and left them on a road outside.

With no clear instructions on what to do, the people of Le Havre took matters into their own hands. As the Germans continued to bomb their town, they gathered in their thousands on the quayside and at the ferry terminals trying to get on a boat that would take them away from the hell that had beset their town.

Le Havre is spread along the northern side of the mouth of the Seine. Although it is a seaport, it actually faces the Seine and the region of Lower Normandy on the other side. The only way to leave Le Havre was to cross the river, to go south-east by road would mean heading towards Paris and the Germans. Because of ancient rivalries with the port of Rouen, further down the Seine, there was no bridge crossing the river at Le Havre until the 1950s. The only way across was by ferry, of which there were three at different points outside the town. Although they were capable of taking cars, the thousands of people who were trying to get on to these relatively small boats meant that many cars had to be abandoned so that their occupants could get on board.

In the absence of any evacuation plan, people only knew what was happening through rumour. This is how they learnt that the council had abandoned the town. It was obvious when those running the public services left as suddenly there was no running water, no electricity and no trams. The German bombs which continued to fall caused a fire that spread through the centre of town. Since the fire fighters had already left, because their equipment had been irrevocably damaged by the bombs, there was no one to put the fire out and it continued to blaze for several days.¹⁷ All the shops were now shut so there was no food available to anyone who decided to stay. There were people using the chaos to steal what they could from empty houses and shops. The National Guard left,

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 52–3.

¹⁷ Bengtsson, p. 42.

but before doing so opened the doors of their stables allowing fifteen horses to gallop round the centre of town. One eyewitness described a smell of decay permeating the town as abandoned cats and dogs died in the gutters and meat rotted in the butchers shops, covered with flies.¹⁸

For the thousands who could not get out of town to the ferry terminals, the only hope of escape was getting on a boat from the port that would take them out to sea and along the coast. This was not easy as the Luftwaffe were bombing the ships in and around the port.¹⁹ The cruise liner, the 'Général Metzinger', had been requisitioned by the French navy. It was sent to Le Havre to help rescue refugees but while in the harbour, on 11 June, it was bombed by a German plane and in minutes was in flames. The Belgian ship, the 'Albertville', was sent with the 'Général Metzinger' but was not allowed access to the harbour because the harbour was too full of ships. While waiting for entry it sailed nearby and it was there that it was bombed and sank. The English liner, 'the Bruges', was in the harbour waiting her turn to reach the quayside to collect refugees when it was bombed several times and sunk.

One ship that managed to pick up refugees was the 'Niobé'. This was a cargo ship which until being requisitioned by the French navy carried coal from England to Caen and returned with iron ore. Once requisitioned it was responsible for moving munitions between ports on both sides of the English Channel. At the beginning of June it collected a load of munitions in Dover and then took them to Cherbourg. The cargo had not been fully unloaded when it was sent on to Le Havre to help with the rescue effort. Once docked in Le Havre, on 10 June, a British officer came on board and ordered the rest of the munitions be unloaded. However, there were no dockers left to do the job as they, like everyone else in the town, were trying to leave. The 'Niobé' crew tried to do it themselves but they did not have the right equipment. At the same time, the townsfolk were massed on the quaysides trying to get on a boat, any boat. The crew knew the rumours that the invading Germans were planning to attack civilians and felt they had to rescue their compatriots despite the fact that their cargo was still unloaded.

One of those civilians on the quayside was a girl called Louise Gadebois. She described many years later in an article for the local paper what happened before and after she embarked on the 'Niobé':

18 Guillebard, p. 53.

19 I am indebted to the website of Le Grieme, an association based in Normandy, devoted to the discovery of shipwrecks and the diffusion of their history, for many of the details of ships destroyed in and around Le Havre in June 1940: <http://www.grieme.org/pages/index2.html> (accessed 10.02.15).

During the night of the 10th and 11th of June the bombing was so terrible that we went to sleep in a garage that belonged to the owner of our building. The next morning, when we wanted to return to our home, the whole neighbourhood was on fire. We weren't allowed to go and see what had become of our house. My sister became terribly frightened. We didn't know what to do. We decided that we would try and get to our family in Brittany. As the road to the nearest ferry port had been machine-gunned, we decided to leave by sea... So we went to the port to get on a ship with all the other local people who wanted to leave. My mother got on a small boat which took her to Trouville... Suddenly there was an air raid warning and we all had to take shelter. Then a soldier put my sister and me into a boat to reach a ship, the *Niobé*, which was being fitted out. As we crossed the port we saw the anti-aircraft guns shoot down a German plane which landed on a petrol tank.

Eight hundred people got on. It was a real crush. There were some soldiers, women, children, staff from the local hospital. We didn't know then that it was loaded with munitions... We had been warned — try to protect yourself, you're going to be shot at. After two hours at sea the planes arrived. They passed level with the masts. We could clearly see the swastikas. We had artillery on board. One soldier next to me shouted "Fire, fire!" No one moved and the planes dropped their bombs. Who knows, one single shot could have stopped them.²⁰

Under the violence of the explosion Louise lost consciousness and when she came to she found herself at the front of the boat which had broken in two. She found her sister who had fainted and tried to rouse her but at that moment the water rushed in and swept her sister off and she never saw her again. Somehow Louise managed to hold on to a piece of wreckage for an hour and half. She described the experience: 'It was terrible... Body parts were floating on the surface, there was a head not far from me, people were screaming. An English boat came past, we thought it would help us but it just kept going.'

Eventually the crew of a French boat went to save who they could. Only eleven people were saved of the crew and the eight hundred passengers: seven sailors, a child, two civilians and Louise. But even then Louise's trauma was not over. She was naked, her face had been injured and she almost lost an eye, her chest was burnt, her limbs were black from frostbite and she was poisoned from drinking in fuel-oil mixed with sea-water. She was taken to hospital but discharged two days later into a town where she knew no one wearing only a dress and sweater, with bare feet, bandage over her eye and fuel-oil in her hair. Finally she came across a family she knew from Le Havre who took care of her and together they started walking west trying to flee the oncoming Germans, completely panicked by the rumours which were spreading about the invading army. Eventually they realised that the Germans had already

20 Billet, J.-C., *Résistants de l'Ombre* (Le Havre: CPH, 1997), pp. 91–95 (my translation).

arrived and that there was no point trying to escape. They would have to turn round and go back to Le Havre. But this meant another boat trip. Somehow she overcame her panic at going back on the water and eventually arrived home. Her suffering, however, was still not over as on being reunited with her mother she then had to tell her that her other daughter was dead.

For the people of Le Havre the panic and mayhem of those days in June remained deep in their collective consciousness. After the armistice was signed the state began the process of clearing the rubble and repairing the damage caused by the bombing. However, it could not restore one of the consequences of the chaos of June: the recovery of property that had been looted. In the local paper, from the end of June and through the summer, item after item appeared in the small ads from people trying to recover their stolen goods. Most of the ads were entitled 'Récompense' or 'Reward', indicating that many people were not going to the police to get their property back and that there were simply too many of these cases for the police to cope with. Many of the ads offered rewards for getting cars back that had been left at the ferry ports in June. If the car was still there, its contents often were not.

We can take just one ad to see what people were taking with them in the exodus: 'Reward to the people who bring back the suitcase found in a car at the Berville ferry: linens, dresses, coats, sheets, jewellery, Alsatian doll, communion missal, photo of sailor named Georges-Maurice Doudet, including other objects and medicines. Contact Mme Doudet' and a Le Havre address.²¹ From this we see that it was not just a matter of having something expensive stolen, which not many people yet owned — a car — but that people had their basic things like clothes and medicines as well as possessions of sentimental value stolen as well. It also shows the mind-set of one woman as the bombs rained down; she was fleeing her home and taking what was necessary and also what was dear to her — a photo of her son or husband, a doll, a communion book.

When the people of Le Havre looked back on the exodus they saw chaos, panic, their houses attacked, and their personal items stolen, and no help from the authorities.

Although it was the Germans who were dropping bombs in June 1940, almost as soon as they stopped, it was the RAF who started to drop its bombs on Le Havre. This went on for the next two years. For the rest of 1940 and the whole of 1941 the bombing raids were at night and then in 1942 they began to be during the day as well as the night. Although

21 'Le Petit Havre', Wednesday 10 July 1940, Municipal Archives, Le Havre (my translation).

the bombs were aimed at the port and factories, aiming in the dark was an imprecise science and often it was the town and its French citizens who were hit.

In his diary, Julien Guillemard related the experience of living in a town that was being bombed night after night, the sirens going, the exhaustion of going down to the cold cellar to then listen in fear to 'the string of bombs... with their horrible whistling growing louder and louder'²² expecting every moment to be their last. He describes how every evening, during a period of bombing, there would be people looking for a part of town they felt would be safe, or going to sleep in the tramway tunnel, or leaving the centre altogether to find somewhere in the suburbs. In his memoir, Max Bengtsson relates how when the bombing became unbearable, his parents decided to find somewhere else to sleep. With three bicycles between two parents and two sons, they cycled out of town until they found a farm which would take them. From then on, they left town every evening, bedded down in the straw in a barn alongside other refugees from Le Havre, and then the next morning cycled back to town. However, this only lasted two months. Bengtsson explains the reason: 'The discomfort, the cold, and the weariness from the commute, all got the better of the fear of the bombing.' They returned home and continued the nightly descent to the cellar.²³

In Jessica Hammett's paper, "We're absolute heroes now to everyone", we can see how prepared the British were before the Blitz had even happened. In Le Havre, it was only after their 'Blitz' of June 1940 that building work began on bomb shelters. 126 shelters were built between 1940 and 1944, able to house, on average, between twenty and 150 people. There were a few that could take more than five hundred and one gigantic one that could shelter 12,700 people. This last was the Jenner tunnel, a tunnel linking the lower half of Le Havre with the upper town which lies up above on a cliff. This tunnel had been planned before the war in order to link the two halves of the town. In 1942 it was decided to build it to act as a giant shelter which could be reverted to its original planned use once the war was over.²⁴

Despite the building of these shelters, the daily as well as nightly bombing raids on Le Havre in 1942 led to plans to evacuate parts of the town. It might be thought that the townsfolk would be relieved to put the fear of death or injury behind them. However, this was not the case. The

22 Guillemard, p. 44 (my translation).

23 Bengtsson, p. 68 (my translation).

24 Malon, pp. 103–4.

memory of those chaotic days in June 1940 remained as a touchstone of everything to be feared from evacuation. A police report in April 1942 noted:

The frequent RAF bombing, during both day and night, which has been going on for three weeks over Le Havre and its suburbs, has produced a serious unease in the population. The evacuation of certain areas of Le Havre and the worry that this decision created in the areas targeted, create in our town a feverish uncertain atmosphere which greatly resembles the terrible days of June 1940.²⁵

In May the mood had not improved, according to the police, 'The evacuation of certain areas of Le Havre... continues to produce in the population an unease and ill-hidden apprehension.'²⁶ In June 1942 one of the concerns about evacuation becomes clear in a police report, 'our fellow citizens wonder if in the case of a total evacuation measures would be taken to keep their belongings from being stolen.'²⁷ And even in August the town's sub-prefect was reporting:

The measures currently being studied for a possible evacuation of coastal towns, without being revealed, are however feared by the populations who are affected by the thought of a new exodus and who realise the even greater difficulties if this evacuation had to take place at the moment.²⁸

So even after two years of being bombed, it was the memory of the exodus with its chaos and panic, lootings and bereavements, which meant that the thought of another evacuation was more terrifying than staying put. Even if staying at home meant the constant anxiety of being bombed, it was still home. And home meant having your family close and your possessions safe, or at least for the moment.

The memory of June 1940 continued right till the end of the Occupation. In August 1944, the local German commander, Hermann-Eberhard Wildermuth, tried to evacuate the town in preparation for the arrival of the Allies and the battle that would then take place. As Andrew Knapp notes in his article, 'The Destruction and Liberation of Le Havre in Living Memory', 'Wildermuth observes that the Havrais were reluctant evacuees, even when he tried to clear the town by force.'²⁹ Of the many reasons

25 Report from the head of the local *Renseignements Généraux* (French intelligence service) to the sub-prefect, 20.4.42, Departmental archives, Rouen.

26 Report from the local *Renseignements Généraux* to the sub-prefect, 20.5.42, DA, Rouen.

27 Report from the local police superintendent to the sub-prefect, 20.6.42, DA, Rouen.

28 Letter from the sub-prefect to the prefect, 25.8.42, DA, Rouen.

29 Knapp, A., 'The Destruction and Liberation of Le Havre in Living Memory', *War*

given for this reluctance the first was the memory of June 1940 and specifically the looting that occurred at the time. People felt safer in their own homes with their possessions around them.

What happened next, though, in 1944, has superseded the memories of June 1940 in the post-war collective memory of Le Havre.

In order to liberate Le Havre, the British bombed the town for a week, 5–12 September 1944, from all sides, from the sea, from the land and from the air. The result was that it could claim the dubious honour of being the most damaged town in the whole of France. 82% of it was destroyed: 12,500 buildings were completely destroyed and 4500 partially. Over half the population were made homeless and 1536 people were killed with 517 missing.³⁰ Most of the damage was done on the first day, 5 September, when Le Havre was practically razed to the ground. The strategic reasons for this are still contested, but for the people of Le Havre there could be no justification. The pointlessness of this bombing raid remains the main memory of the war for the inhabitants of this town. As Knapp writes, 'Every year, and especially on major anniversaries, Le Havre's local press dwells on this sense of an inexplicable and unjust raid.'³¹

To add to this memory is the outrage that the British did not allow the population to be evacuated before the bombing began. This despite the fact that the British had received intelligence from various sources that there were still twenty to thirty thousand civilians left in Le Havre at the end of August 1944.³² Despite British denials, Knapp comments that the people of Le Havre still believe that Wildermuth asked the British that the town be evacuated before they started bombing and that the British refused.³³ This shows how significantly post-war memory changed from the memory held during the war. Then the memory was about the dangers of evacuation; post-war it was the memory of the dangers of not being evacuated.

The sinking of the *Niobé* in June 1940 was supplanted in people's minds by another tragedy, this one caused by the bombing in September 1944. On 6 September civilians living in the upper part of Le Havre were scared that it would be their turn to be bombed after the destruction of the lower town on the 5th. They headed for the Jenner Tunnel, which, we saw above, had been built to shelter over twelve thousand civilians.

and Society, Vol. 14, No. 4 (November 2007), p. 485.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 477.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 495.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 484.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 487.

The tunnel had two sections; the western side had been bombed already. An exhibition about the tunnel held in Le Havre during 2014, at the municipal archives, tells what happened next:

On the stroke of 18:00 explosive bombs and firebombs massively hit Acacias, Aplemont and Frileuse [three areas in the upper town near the Jenner Tunnel]. The inhabitants of these areas rushed to the northern entrance of the tunnel but the tunnel was totally swamped by the thousands of refugees who were already there. Hundreds of people, seized with panic, forced their way through the bombed entrance of the western side. As soon as they were through, around 19:00, a bomb exploded a few metres at the back of the entrance, collapsing the tunnel, crushing those who were close to the entrance and trapping 325 people in a service tunnel which was two metres wide and 120 metres long. Rescue work could not begin until the bombing ended an hour later, and only reached the victims at 06:00 the next day. There were only six survivors; the majority of the victims had suffocated to death.³⁴

Maybe collective memory can only hold one shocking tragedy at a time. In the strange way that memory sometimes works, the terrible loss of the Niobé has become significant, not for the town as a whole, but for a group of people who dive for a hobby, looking for shipwrecks. For sixty-two years after her sinking her wreck remained unfound since no one was really clear as to where exactly she had gone down. This made it a challenge for divers to find. In addition a myth grew up around the wreck that there was treasure on board. Rumours swirled that Belgian and Dutch refugees had been on the ship and that they had brought a quantity of diamonds with them. In 2002, it was finally a team of divers from a diving school in Le Havre who discovered the wreck, in a stretch of the Channel between Le Havre and Antifer. As well as the name of the ship, they also found its smokestack, its winches and boilers, the motor and a tangle of metal crumpled by the explosion. There was also a large number of munitions, but no diamonds.³⁵ Its propeller has been installed next to the small plaque that was erected in the port in 1986 in memory to those who died when the ship was bombed during the exodus, in June 1940.³⁶

34 <http://goo.gl/knQGGq> (accessed 15.02.15; my translation).

35 <http://www.grieme.org/pages/index2.html> (accessed 10.02.15); 'Au Havre: il y a 72 ans sombrait le Niobé', Le Havre Infos, 12/06/2012, <http://www.lehavreinfos.fr/2012/06/05/il-y-a-72-ans-sombrait-le-niobe/> (accessed 10.02.15).

36 <http://www.grieme.org/pages/index2.html> (accessed 10.02.15).