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Holocaust survivor set to speak in Tulsa was 18 before he knew he was Jewish

Holocaust survivor was 18 before he knew he was Jewish

By Bill Sherman Tulsa World Nov 3, 2017 4



Kristallnacht commemoration

When: 2 p.m. Nov. 12

Where: Jewish Federation of Tulsa, 2021 E. 71st St.

Info: Free event. For details call 918-495-1100.

Film screening

Holocaust survivor Pierre Sauvage's documentary film "Weapons of the Spirit" will be shown 7 p.m. Nov. 11 at Circle Cinema, 10 S. Lewis Ave.

Sauvage will attend the showing and answer questions.

Tickets are \$9.50 and \$7.50 for military, students and teachers, available at circlecinema.com or at the theater box office.



Documentary filmmaker Pierre Sauvage, born to Jewish parents in a French village that harbored thousands of Jews during the Holocaust, did not find out he was Jewish until he was 18 years old.

Sauvage will speak in Tulsa next weekend at an event commemorating the 79th anniversary of Kristallnacht — Night of Broken Glass — the attack on thousands of Jewish businesses and synagogues in Germany that is considered the beginning of the Holocaust.

He was born in Nazi-occupied France, in Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, a small farming community 30 miles south of Lyon.

His father, a journalist, and his mother had sought refuge there from the Nazis. The village was an enclave of Huguenots, French Protestants in the heavily Catholic nation.

The 5,000 people of Le Chambon sheltered some 5,000 Jewish people during a four-year period of the war.

After the war, the family moved to Paris and, when he was 4, to New York City, where Sauvage was raised.

But his parents, whom he described as vehemently anti-religious and entirely secular, hid from him that history and his Jewish identity, he said in a phone interview this week.

Only when he was about to continue his education in France, and to stay with a cousin who was a survivor of Auschwitz concentration camp, did his parents tell him he was Jewish.

Sauvage lived for eight years in Paris, became a filmmaker and then moved to southern California, where he now lives.

In the course of his career, he returned to the village of his birth to make a documentary film titled “Weapons of the Spirit” about the village’s role in protecting Jews from the Nazis.

There he met some of the people who had cared for him as a baby.

“That was my first contact with religious people,” he said. “I had clichéd notions in my mind about who religious people were. I thought confidently from my smug, secular point of view that religious people were — well, candidly — dimwitted.

“But I realized that these people I was meeting in Le Chambon were among the sharpest people I had ever met. These were people who had a clear sense of their own identity. They were so rooted, and I was the opposite. ...

“I came to realize that having a clear sense of identity is one of the stepping stones to good conduct.”

Protecting the Jews from the Nazis was something they did naturally, out of a sense of who they were, he said.

“They simply couldn’t imagine themselves not responding in a way that seemed right. ... They viewed their self-interest as remaining people who could look at themselves in the mirror without cringing.”

Sauvage said it made him realize the “clear sense” good people have of their own self-interest, mental health and balance.

“Good people are happier,” he said.

Much of his film showed close-ups of the faces of the people of Le

Chambon.

“A lot comes out of seeing their expressions, seeing their faces,” he said. “Realizing that a woman’s shrug dismissing the significance of what she did is more eloquent than a thousand speeches.



The advertisement features the PenFed Credit Union logo at the top, which consists of a blue and white geometric icon followed by the text "PENFED CREDIT UNION". Below the logo, the text "GREAT RATES for EVERYONE" is written in a blue, sans-serif font. Underneath that, "On Personal Loans" is written in a smaller blue font. The most prominent feature is the rate "9.99% APR*" in a large, bold, blue font. To the left of the rate, it says "Rates as low as:". At the bottom of the ad, there is a small disclaimer: "*Rate effective October 6, 2017 and subject to change. To receive any advertised product you must become a member of PenFed Credit Union. ©2017 PenFed Credit Union". In the bottom left corner, it says "FEDERALLY INSURED BY NCUA". In the bottom right corner, there is a green button with the text "Learn More >".



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“They’re not being falsely modest. They genuinely do not think what they did was a big deal because it came so naturally to them.”

After his experience with the religious people of Le Chambon, he said his mindset changed.

“I’m no longer anti-religious,” he said. “I’m not a believer, but I believe that religion raises significant questions that we should all attempt to deal with honestly and intelligently.”

As a documentary filmmaker, Sauvage said he has explored not only the minority of people who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust, but also the vast majority of people, both in Europe and America, who turned a blind eye, or remained silent.

He has been struck in recent days by the parallels he sees in the mounting reports of widespread sexual harassment by people in high places.

“None of this could have happened if there weren’t, on the one hand, enablers, and silence,” he said, what some have called “a conspiracy of silence.”

“Because I was raised with taboos, secrets, about my own history, I have a real aversion to taboos,” he said.

Sauvage will speak at 2 p.m. Nov. 12 at the Jewish Federation of Tulsa, 2021 E. 71st St., and at several schools while he is Tulsa.

The commemoration is free and suitable for adults and youths in sixth grade and above. For details, call the Jewish Federation at 918-495-1100.

The event is sponsored by the Jewish Federation’s Council for Holocaust Education, Tulsa City-County Library, Circle Cinema, Northeastern State University and NEA Big Read, a program of the National Endowment for the Arts in partnership with Arts Midwest.

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