Achille Gassmann, curé de Moussey

Résistant et grand Monsieur :

Un (très) succinct aperçu :
Achille Gasmann (en fait Gassmann), curé de Moussey jusqu'à la mobilisation de 39, combattant de 39-40 dans l'armée du Nord, capitaine aumônier, évacué vers l'Angleterre depuis Dunkerque, hébergé dans le Sud du pays, revenu en France au début du printemps 41, un court moment aumônier dans un "chantier de jeunesse" franc-comtois (le temps de « blanchir » sa situation, administrativement « irrégulière »), (auto)réinstallé quelques temps plus tard dans sa cure de Moussey pour, et à la manière apprise au contact des Anglais, refuser la défaite et Résister. Homme si secret dans ses propos et discret dans se actes que les Allemands, et même l'officier de renseignement de Loyton (et nombre de "gens d'ici") n'en avaient rien découvert. L'âme, et un pilier-clé, de la Résistance du secteur

En appui :
Ce témoignage ci-dessous, condensé d'un entretien avec Christopher Sykes début 1945 (l'officier, là en chair et en os, du renseignement de Loyton) et publié par ce dernier dans son livre *Four Studies In Loyalty,* chapitre 4 *In times of stress :*

before, at the end of November. The American Army had crossed the Meurthe and the Germans had fled from all these valleys. I can find no better description of the sensation of being freed than that given by Miss Gertrude Stein, who was herself in a French town when it was liberated. "You feel natural," she says. "You may feel good or you may feel bad, but you feel natural." At last we were all natural again. It was wonderful simply to stand in a street in broad daylight. I must confess that it was with some feeling of trepidation that I returned to our town: so much had been suffered, and so much of it for our unworthy sake. But their loyalty was without stint. I was acclaimed as if I had saved the world. We had become a legend. Prodigies of valour were ascribed to me personally, to which, in truth, I can make not the smallest shadow of a claim. I do not wish to exaggerate the generosity of these people or to sentimentalise; I only write down what I saw happen.

It was during this second visit that I learned of the very extraordinary manner in which this fine resistance had first been organised, of the distant origin of much of this spirit of valour, and the more I think of it the more deeply am I impressed at the way unnoticed things can resolve great events.

I heard from our friends, as we spoke in the new luxury of free speech, that the man to whom most was owed was one who had never appeared to us, nor of whom we had ever heard—the parish priest. Throughout the war, they said, it was he who had kept the spirit of loyalty and patriotism alive, it was he who had first organised a Maquis here at the very beginning of resistance, who had built a system which he then joined to the main one for the escape of "baled-out" airmen and of fugitive prisoners of war. "Without him," said Madame Rossi, and her evidence counted for a lot with me, "things might have been very different here." It became clear why we had not heard of him. As the Germans kept so close a watch on him, more close than on any other man,

his least abnormal movement was likely to be discovered. He posed as a neutral, and maintained contact with the resistance only through a very few people and at well-disguised meetings. These few were sworn to absolute secrecy. In the midst of the many secrets of the town his was the most thoroughly guarded. My anxiety to meet him was great.

I found a man whose appearance suggested immediately one of those pre-Reformation clerics whose zeal for their holy calling was only matched by their fearful prowess on the field of battle. A stern, lean, cadaverous appearance, wonderfully made gentle by the humour and grace of his smile. There was a pleasant irony in the way he spoke; you somehow felt from his expressions that while as a priest, without any easy hope of success, he considered himself charged with the machinery of redemption, as a man he was left in blank wonder at the heights and the depths of human nature which he had witnessed. We had some business to discuss together. He was waging a campaign against the counter-atrocities which had inevitably begun to appear all over France; he knew where some of our lost men had been murdered, buried, or taken away, and he wanted to know from me where the bodies of the two Algerian spies were to be found. "The dead must be respectfully buried," he said grimly; "a point which my parishioners may sometimes ignore." He told me about the origins of the Maquis and of the absurd political rivalries which were already showing themselves in claims for deeds of courage. Sometimes, when a point amused him—and he had much sense of humour—he emphasised a remark with the subtlest exaggeration of a priestly gesture. A grand man.

At the end of our first discussion together I told him that I wanted to thank him for all that he had done for us, but that there was nothing I could say that was not absurdly inadequate. I said that if there was something we could do to show our gratitude, I was certain we would

do it if it was in the least within the bounds of possibility.

He was silent in thought for a moment, and then: "As regards me, there is no question of your owing gratitude," he said, and added enigmatically: "You know I would do anything for the English."

"That is kind." I waited in silence for another reply which I felt him to be forming in his mind.

"You see," he said, "speaking for myself, not for the town, the debt was on my side, and I am only happy to have discharged it. I have only once been to England, and it was there that I was made your debtor. . . ." He then told me an extraordinary story.

At the beginning of the war this priest was a chaplain in the French Army, and when the disaster of 1940 occurred his regiment was among those who were evacuated by us from Dunkirk. For the first time, then, he met Englishmen in large numbers, and he saw to his amazement that the legendary "flegme britannique" was no legend at all. The calm and the patience on the beaches made him wonder whether, perhaps, all was lost indeed. He told me that he waded to his boat behind an English private soldier during a severe raid by German aircraft; that as they waited their turn in the water, the English soldier lit his pipe and cursed in vexation because it took him so long to get a steady flame. But it was after his arrival in England that the priest contracted that great debt to discharge which he felt his personal honour deeply engaged. The problem of how to accommodate the many foreign troops who suddenly arrived in England was difficult; the priest was sent with several other Frenchmen to a small hotel in a town on the South Coast. The town was bombed several times while he was there. He told me that never in his life had he suffered such appalling depression of spirits, such despair, such grief, as at this time, though, unlike many other Frenchmen then, he was not assailed by any doubts as to where his duty lay: it lay with his parishioners in the Vosges. But what wretched humiliation was he not

likely to find there? Heavily and insistently the bitterness of defeat weighed on his mind and soul.

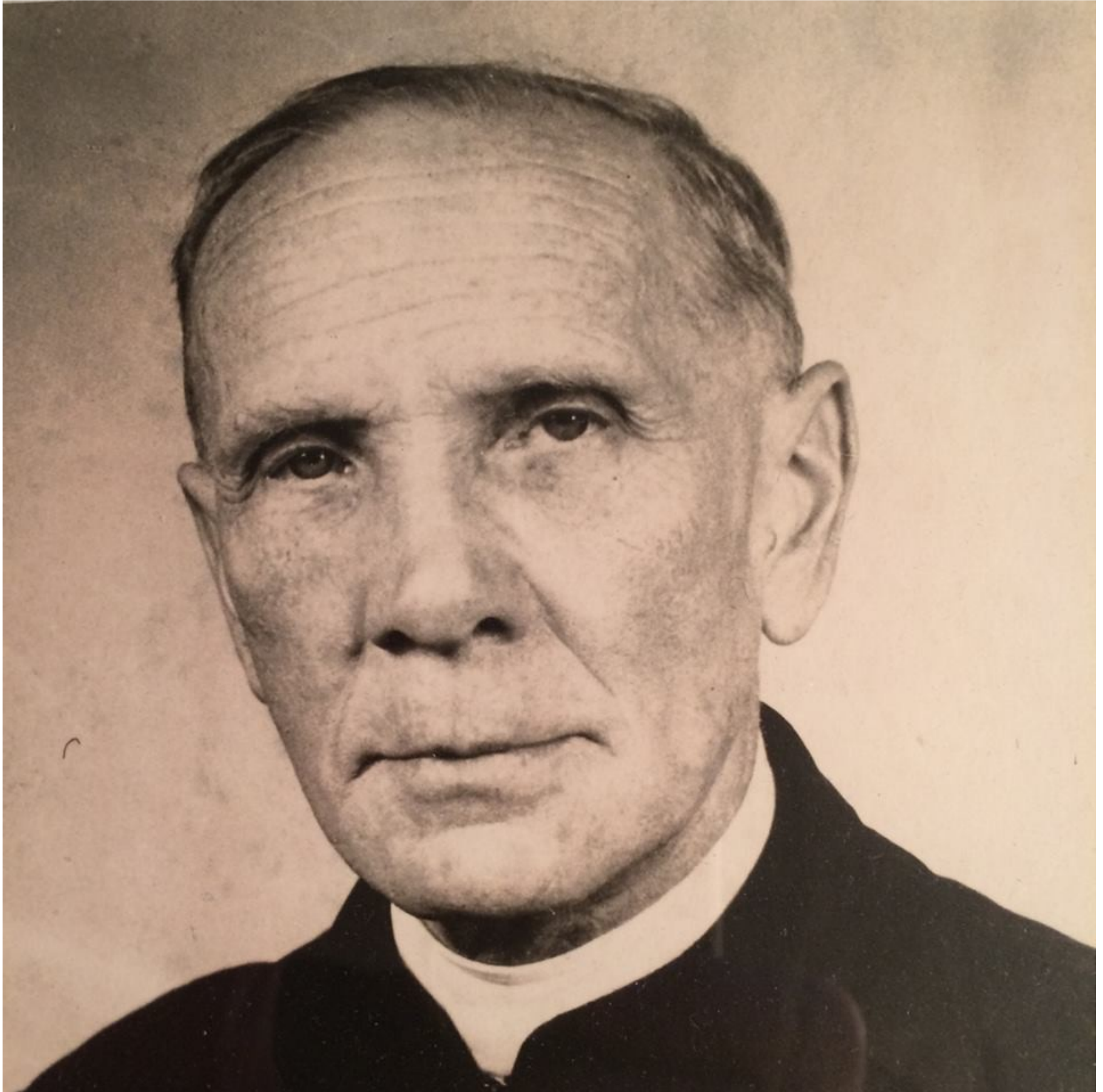
The hotel where they stayed was kept by two women. It was a good hotel. These two women devised what they could to cheer the Frenchmen who had been billeted on them. They taught them English words, they learned French words in return, they explained the news in the papers to them, they borrowed a wireless so that they could listen to those first French programmes of the Gaullist movement. But what impressed my friend most was that in spite of the danger, the terrors, the bombing, the life of the hotel went on as smoothly and quietly as though this were a holiday season in peace. The routine, the meals, the style of comfort went on uninterrupted. It was this simple fact which made the deepest impression on him. It is easy to laugh at English seaside hotels, but this one achieved something that can well be called great.

"It was those two women," said Monsieur le Curé with a sudden burst of enthusiasm, "who proved to me that the English are very formidable people. I recognised in a flash we must be formidable too, and that it was possible, above all, that it was possible."

That was his story, and that was one of the origins of a resistance to which I would like to pay some homage which is not too unworthy.

When I thought over this extraordinary, this utterly unexpected story, my mind worked back to another incident: another tale of Anglo-French accord.

Some years before the war, in the interests of Anglo-French understanding, a body of men interested in exchanges of our two cultures organised an exhibition in London of some positively incomprehensibly advanced works of art. A large fashionable crowd congregated in a gallery, and proceedings were opened by an English professor, who explained the aims of the French, English, and other artists concerned. He told us that this group of men "had not a shred of respect" for the traditions of



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Moussey 3 novembre 1946, inauguration du Monument des Déportés