

FRANCE PÉJOT

*pas d'accent*  
*Péjot*

Among French women who discovered they could act--and lie well--was France Péjot. France's Resistance name was 'Marianne; the woman who symbolizes the French Republic. Her family owned 'La Lingerie Pratique,' one of the best known stores for laces and luxury trimmings in Lyon. The family supported resistance from the beginning and helped with the means at their disposal. In addition to the parents, the family included older sister Raymonde and France, born in 1914. The girls' mother died in 1941; their father

1933

6 Jun 1942

died the following year after a long illness. Since her sister had married, Pèjot was now on her own. Thus it is perhaps not surprising that France was asked to join the Resistance by family friends. In so doing she acquired a new 'family,' one she could not let down.

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"Our family followed politics passionately. We were very interested in events, the war especially. We read resistance tracts and papers. And we heard de Gaulle's call of June 18th on our radio. That was an emotional moment for all of us. My father had tears in his eyes. We asked ourselves who was this man and what did he want us to do? We did not know what the Resistance would become. Barely a week after my father's death in January 1942 people we knew--who had already brought us copies of their paper Franc-Tireur--asked my sister and I if we would meet with friends who lived on our street. These were the Ferstenbergs; who changed their name because they were Jewish.(1) It was in their home that we met Jean-Pierre Lévy (one of the founders of Franc-Tireur) and joined the Résistance. They used our store to hide clandestine records and newspapers. The family apartment--4 Place des Jacobins--served as a meeting place. (It was located in the center of the city; hence ideal for all the comings and goings). Lévy met there with the heads of Libération and Combat. Jean Moulin came to the store frequently. At that time I did not know how important he was. We just knew that he came from London to contact all the Resistance movements. He was a modest man with a

piercing look. He always wore a hat and a scarf--to hide the scar from his attempted suicide.(2)

"So we helped as we could. We stored papers, did liaison, and helped make false identity cards. Sometimes we took the train to distribute papers and mail. In short, everything that had to be done to run a Resistance movement. Soon the apartment became the movement's office. I lived alone in the large family apartment after my father's death. Raymonde was married and lived above our store, not too far away. The two of us did all the secretarial work until it became too much. Remember, we were also running the shop. Then Micheline Eude (a young law student) volunteered to become full-time secretary.

"One morning after an arrest in our group, police came to the family apartment. They had been given my name. Micheline was already there looking over the movement's mail. When the bell rang at nine I thought it was one of our members. I was holding my lipstick and finishing dressing before going to open the store. Two men in civilian clothes were at the door--Vichy police. I made a sign to Micheline and escorted them into the living room. Micheline took the typewriter--no, not the typewriter, compromising papers--into the back room where she hid them. The apartment was very big. It had a separate servants' entrance and quarters in the back where we stored things. Unfortunately the <sup>Vichy Police</sup> Germans found the typewriter, and some compromising carbon papers. But they did not find our major documents. My sister had had an excellent idea. She typed clandestine information--like the names and addresses of

our agents elsewhere--on tissue paper. We sewed these papers into the lining of our clothes which hung in the closet. These papers were never found. To do so would have meant taking the garments apart.

"My mind was working rapidly. Lévy would be arriving soon. What could be done to save him? As soon as he rang I rushed to meet him and embraced him. I was very timid then and he intimidated me. He was very reserved himself and was about to become engaged. But this was the normal things to do, under the circumstances. So there I was embracing him and kissing him with my newly painted lips. There is always an amusing side to situations like that. 'Darling,' I said, and he understood right away. He wasn't stupid. 'Look what has happened. The police are here. Forgive me. I didn't tell you--I was wrong--but I have been helping the Resistance, etc.' 'What,' he answered, 'You did that when you know I am Jewish!' Officially he was a salesman for a Strasbourg firm although he spent most of his time with the movement. He entered into the game and scolded: 'You should never have done it.' I spent the entire interrogation seated on his lap; although very intimidated.

"Then I remembered that Clavier--another of our leaders--was also scheduled to come. Clavier's business was metal security doors. My mind worked feverishly to find some plausible reason for his visit. Then I remembered that a building on our street with a glass front had recently been bombed--by our group. Everything blew up. It was the headquarters of a collaborationist group. So

I decided to say that we had a glass store front and needed protection. We needed a metal door; his business. Once again I rushed to rush to the door when the bell rang. I said I was glad to see him so we could discuss the door. Stupidly he answered: 'I brought you the soap you wanted.' (He had some financial affairs). For him to say he was bringing me my soap he should have had some soap with him. But he didn't. So I said: 'Yes, I know you are going to bring me some soap but today I want to discuss the security door with you.' At last he understood. I stuck to my story. I insisted that Lévy didn't know anything and Clavier was there for the security door. Micheline said the same thing. We were all arrested anyhow. The police searched the men's lodgings, but found nothing so they were obliged to release them.

"They kept Micheline and me. I stayed in prison. Here, I have the dates. I made this agenda in prison so that I could remember the dates. 'Friday . . . a charming dinner.' Yes, it was my birthday; October 17th, 1942. I celebrated it with Lévy, his mother and two friends. They brought me perfume, roses. It was very, very lovely. Saturday, the next day, I was arrested. It's marked 'Arrest.' And the following day, 'Arrived at the temporary prison.' I stayed there three days. 'Arrived at Saint-Joseph,' the common law prison. And the next day I noted: 'Micheline's first louse.' You amuse yourself as you can. Micheline made quite a fuss over that first louse. Then the entry: 'Micheline's departure.' She left November 12. They were able to arrange her release. She was young; barely nineteen. We in the Resistance

were put in prisons with common criminals. The other prisoners called us the 'diplomats.' They were really kind to us; all those thieves, prostitutes, petty criminals. And we were very, very good to them.

"Among other resistance members in that prison was someone special--I am trying to remember her name--that white-haired woman who was decapitated. (Berty Albrecht, who presumably committed suicide; see Chapter Nine). She was the one who got Micheline freed. She had a daughter who looked like Micheline. She pleaded for them to free this young girl who was just nineteen and in those sordid surroundings. And she won. I was kept there until <sup>3 months</sup> ~~Nov.~~ <sup>(Jan 1943)</sup> ~~25th.~~ Now I'm not going to give you all the details; they really aren't that important.

"We were very bored in prison. However, instead of releasing me on the date they should have--everyone was waiting at the apartment for me; they were all there and had filled the place with roses--the authorities brought me back to the temporary jail. The government had decided that those arrested for Resistance were to be sent to special camps. I had been sentenced to three months in jail and had served my sentence. But the government decided to send Resistance members, and all the madames and johns--all those spoilsports--to a camp in the Midi. I spent three weeks in the temporary jail. They couldn't make up their minds about sending me to the camp. Normally you spend a short time in holding cells. It was temporary. They put everyone there; street people; prostitutes and the like. And there were lice. I have never seen such big

ones; body lice three millimeters long. But they didn't stick to me. They just went over me. I washed myself well--at least as well as I could. There were a few streetwalkers with me. It was an extraordinary experience to be with women like that.

"Some of these women were touching; some were of high moral character, so to speak. I remember there was one woman of the street--unbelievably filthy--who told obscene stories. Another woman told her to shut up. 'Don't you see that that young woman isn't like us. You must respect her.' She was about to hit the woman telling the stories but I stopped her. There is a certain standard of behavior among these women. The place was filthy, horrible. I spent three weeks there and yet my memories are not all that bad.

"One day I was in the courtyard--it was like a medieval fair; the filth was indescribable. To keep busy I swept the courtyard. I like to keep things clean. Also, down below there were male agents and many British and Ammericans. We could communicate somewhat through the bars. I could help a little. One day a young Frenchman came into the courtyard when I was sweeping and asked me what I was doing there. I didn't look like the other women. I explained and he said he was going to look into the matter. I never saw him again. The next day I was released, without being told why. It was certainly his doing. They released me. The moment the order was received they didn't want me anymore. They pushed me outside with my suitcase and shoes--without laces. I left dragging me feet, and that is how I was freed in 1942.

Jan 1943

"I resumed my Resistance work. Then, I was arrested a second time in 1943, but this time it was by the Milice. Again, this was after someone in our group had been arrested. I don't remember the exact dates. I was deported June 30, 1944, so it must have been toward the end of 1943. In any event the dates aren't important. They came to get me at the store. I was just going to open it. My sister wasn't there because she was on a mission. This was the Milice--the French equivalent of the SS, which was serious. They were much worse than the Vichy police. There were a lot of unsavory characters in the Milice. They took me to their headquarters and kept me there for the day. It was awful. You could hear the screams in the basement where they were questioning people; torturing them. For my part I always play the idiot; the dumb, naive young woman.

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The Milice told Pējot that they were looking for her sister as well. Some time earlier France had decided to dye her hair and wear it in a chignon. This altered her appearance completely. When arrested her hair was natural brunette again, and down her back. When asked for a picture of Raymonde, she gave them one of her own with the earlier coiffure, pointing out that her sister was blond, and much shorter; although she wasn't. So they posted people at all the train stations looking for someone completely different from Raymonde. France's ability to improvise and play different roles served her well.

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"A big Milicien--a sort of gorilla covered with medals--appeared. At that time I had a tendency to--well it's not modest to say it, but I had a good figure and I used to take advantage of it somewhat. My concern was to get them to release me. I didn't want to be tortured because it is pointless to play Jeanne d'Arc; to play the martyr. So I did all I could so they would release me. I played the unhappy young thing. I looked at him with pleading eyes. 'What's the matter with you, little one?' he asked. 'I don't know what's going on but I have been here all day. They are looking for my sister, but I don't know what for.' 'Wait, I'm going to look into this.' 'If only you could do something for me.'

"Shortly thereafter I was called to his office. 'If only you could keep me from having to spend the night here!' I pleaded. What I was thinking of was that our apartment had two exits. Perhaps I could do something there; warn someone who could warn my sister. 'We're going to take you home,' he said. So they gave me two malfrats--that's slang; two hooligans--to accompany me home. It's funny but one was a real thug, and the other was a thug who wanted to play the dandy. He had a white turtleneck top and tried to look distinguished. Now I was wearing shoes with high wood heels (as did most Frenchwomen since the Germans commandeered all leather). Going down a bumpy street I took his arm--the arm of the dandy--and asked him to help me. 'Since we are going to be spending the night in my place,' I said, 'I'm going to make you some coffee, real coffee. 'Don't think you can win us over with coffee.' 'I wouldn't even think of it.'

"So we arrived at my parent's large, handsome apartment. I settled them into comfortable chairs and turned on the radio. 'Look, I'm locking the front door while I fix coffee.' They were somewhat intimidated in that setting. I played the gracious hostess to the hilt. They didn't even ask to go to the toilet. What they should have done was check to see if there was another exit. They were really stupid. I told them we were going to be spending the night together. They could assume all was possible. So I went back and forth, putting clothes and things--only what was absolutely necessary--in a box that didn't look like a suitcase. I put it on the back doorstep, beyond the kitchen. All the while I fussed about making the coffee. They were seated on the edge of their chairs. They couldn't be arrogant. I was very gracious with them. I brought them two cups on one trip; then two saucers, and so forth. 'Now,' I said, 'You will have to wait a few minutes while the coffee drips.'

"They waited a long time because I piled up many obstacles between us. Off the kitchen were two servant's rooms and the back service stairway. I propped up stools, copper pans, all kinds of things. A minute is always a minute gained in such cases. I went down the back stairs in total darkness. The light system (minuterie) wasn't working and we lived on the fifth floor. My throat was dry. It felt like a million pins in my mouth. I can still feel it. So I went out into the street with my box and over to the Place des Jacobins. There was one of the traboules (passages) for which Lyon is famous. They go under houses and come

out at a different level, on another street. I went into one right away. If they looked out the window they couldn't see me. And they were waiting for their coffee anyhow. I found refuge with friends."

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Later Pějot learned from the concierge that there had been quite a fuss when the two men from the Milice discovered what had happened. The whole building was awakened. They came back with machine guns and put one up against the concierge's chest. They accused her of being in on the escape. They were frightened because they had let Pějot escape while she was in their custody. She was able to arrange for someone to go to the station and warn her sister not to go to home. The mission was not too dangerous because they were looking for a petite blond. Pějot was arrested--and escaped--for a second time.

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"I left for Paris. I won't tell you all the ups and downs of that trip. I had to get to Paris because Lyon was now too dangerous. They were really looking for me. Nevertheless I did manage to return to the apartment to get a few things. I was disguised as an elderly woman. It's quite easy to dress like one of those women who live in convents; with long coats and enormous old hats. We had our moments of fun, fortunately, for there were tragic times as well. I walked into the building under the noses of the guards they had posted. This was with the concierge's help. I went into the apartment with a flashlight because the shutters

were closed. They had turned the place upside down; emptied the mattresses and all that. Well I managed to take some lingerie (which was very scarce); a few things. And so I left for Paris.

"There I continued my work with Franc-Tireur. I was also involved with NAP Police (infiltration of the police administration). Our maildrop was on rue Saint-Honoré, not far from the Comédie Française. The tea salon there was our 'mailbox.' Every day I went there to collect the mail and bring it to a café on the rue <sup>du</sup> Renard, near Châtelet. One day I arrived at the tea salon shortly before noon. It was rather poorly lit. Then a woman appeared who everyone knew had been arrested a week earlier. 'Bonjour, <sup>Marianne</sup> Francette!' 'What a surprise to see you Solange! We thought you were arrested.' 'Not at all, not at all. I was in bed with a liver attack.' Then two men appeared--two ice boxes. They were Frenchmen--gangsters working for the Gestapo. She said to me: 'I brought two friends from the provinces who want to meet Boucher (one of our leaders). They have some important things to tell him.' At once I understood. But I didn't let on that I realized who they were. 'Of course, but the problem is you will have to wait until six tonight.' Fortunately--it is something you never know beforehand--I realized that I hadn't lost my nerve. I kept my sangfroid. That really helped me because I started to tell them things. I have a wild imagination. I can come up with a story right away. Right away, right away. I can lie very well and yet--at the same time--there is always something plausible in my tales. Of course, I avoided mentioning my other rendez-vous. Instead, I

told them I had a meeting with Boucher at six that evening. That was where we met daily I said. 'Fine, fine,' they responded and then we went out. Out on the sidewalk they surrounded me and grabbed me by the arms. I was expecting it, but I jumped all the same. 'Follow us, German police.' So we were all driven to rue de la Pompe, where I underwent a long interrogation. I always followed the same line of conduct. I wasn't indignant. I did not play the brave Resistance agent. Never.

"When they captured me I was carrying our mail. There were the plans for the Paris uprising with a list of all the police and firemen; all who were going to join in the uprising. It wasn't coded. There were just little points marking the various stations. I told them: 'You know, I don't even know what I am carrying. No, I'm not going to deny it. I am a courier for the Resistance and these are Franc-Tireur newspapers.' And then I continued on with a story I made up. I told my interrogator that I had been arrested in Lyon and had fled. When asked why I was a courier for the movement, I told him I didn't have a work card. Without one I couldn't work. They were looking for me in Lyon. 'And why were you in the Resistance?' 'No, I was never in the Resistance.' So what I told him was partially true. There was always an element of truth in the stories I made up. They're not idiots. 'There are all kinds of denunciations and jealousies,' I continued. And God knows there were many, many denunciations (a tactic all too prevalent during the Occupation, as in earlier centuries there had been denunciations of witchcraft out of vengeance or to settle

vendettas). 'My sister and I were denounced as members of the Resistance because of (the success of) our store. I had to leave, but I never did anything. Jealous women denounced us so I had to leave. And here, in Paris, a Resistance movement contacted me and offered me a job. You have to eat.'

"'That's why I do it. They pay me.' 'My poor little one,' he answered, 'You don't know what you are doing. It's espionage.' 'And I thought all I was doing was carrying newspapers. Well, I'm going to do all I can to help you catch them. I'm going to take you to their six o'clock meeting place. If we don't go today you won't be able to catch them. They change meeting places every day.' Fortunately I thought of that. 'Each evening they decide where to meet the following day which means I don't know where they will meet tomorrow.' That seemed plausible, quite plausible. My only concern was that one of our members might recognize me on the way and not realize I was in the company of German police. They placed me at the supposed meeting-place and stayed a little further off.

"'I'm going to do everything I can to help you,' I insisted, 'because they deceived me so. It's unbelievable!' I lie very well. Of course no one came. In all this I gained time. The rule was that if you were arrested you had to hold out and say nothing for twenty-four hours. After that, they knew you had been arrested. You could talk then. There are times when you can't ask people not to talk. So I had been arrested at noon and here it was the evening already. I just had to hold on til noon the next day.

While we were waiting they threatened me with torture, like the baignoire. All kinds of threats. The only one who didn't was the German. He, the German, didn't threaten me. He was much more effective though; more subtle. He questioned me. The atmosphere between us became so relaxed that he confided in me that he had been a conductor of the Leipzig opera before the war. But he asked me--since I told him I had been arrested in Lyon--why I fled if I were innocent. So I told him. 'But you must know what the men of the Militia are like. They aren't like you.' It was a stroke of genius to say that. You know, there is nothing like treating someone like a gentleman to make him behave like a gentleman. So he was extremely courteous with me. Then I asked him: 'Are you going to arrest me after all?' 'Ah, ma petite, I am forced to. You will be sent to Fresnes prison. But I can offer you an alternative. Come and live with me. We will go out a lot. Each time you see someone you recognize you will point them out.' I didn't react with indignation, but seemed to consider the proposition seriously. 'Yes,' I said, 'I could do that.' Then after a pause, I said: 'No, I really couldn't do that after all, because they would kill me. I'm not courageous enough to do that.' 'Very well, we will go to your place tomorrow.'

"He asked me where I lived but I couldn't tell him because I lived in a hotel on rue d'Assas with all the Franc-Tireur archives: newspapers, addresses--everything. That was the only address I had. It was the room of an elderly spinster. She was a social worker and wasn't there often. I had to hold out twenty-four

hours. But I knew he wanted an address so I made one up. I didn't want to be beaten up.

"The next day, around eleven-thirty, when we were in the car en route to the false address I had given him, I told him I had something to confess. I was really frightened--really afraid. He was seated in the front, next to the chauffeur. I told him I hadn't given him the right address the day before. I really lived on rue d'Assas. He turned around and gave me such a look! I learned afterwards that he could be really ferocious. He tortured a lot of people. He gave me a fierce look. I assumed my wounded dog air. I explained to him that it was because of the woman I stayed with that I hadn't wanted to give him my real address. 'She's a fine woman. She doesn't have the slightest idea of what I'm doing. She knows nothing, absolutely nothing about what I'm doing. You mustn't arrest her. I gave you a false address yesterday because I did not want anything to happen to her.' Again, my story was plausible. Then he turned---I remember it still--and gave me a flick on the nose. 'Ma petite Marianne (my Resistance name), you better not be fooling me.' 'No, no, I'm telling you the truth.' He seemed to believe me.

"When we got to the apartment--what a relief! I wanted to laugh. The place was so clean. Everything had been polished, waxed--and cleaned out. When I didn't come to the rendez-vous or didn't telephone, they understood what had happened. They went to the apartment at once and emptied it. I told them after the war that they went a little too far. They didn't leave me anything--



not even lingerie. They left me a kilo of sugar and a pair of underpants. 'Well, ma petite you don't have many things,' my officer said. 'No. As I told you, I came from Lyon with nothing.' I did manage to take an old cape belonging to Mlle Joseph, the social worker, from the apartment, for all I had on was a light summer dress. He thought it was my own coat. Men just don't notice things like that.

I spent two and a half months at Fresnes prison before I was deported to Ravensbruck. After a few weeks there I was sent to Torgau. First I harvested potatoes; then I worked in a factory. By sheer chance I was not selected when half of our group was sent to the salt mines in Silesia. I've always been lucky in misfortune, but never lucky in my life. My marriage failed. Perhaps I had to endure misfortune in order to see that I was lucky in some things. Anyhow, I went with a group on an infernal train ride that lasted two weeks. We had next to nothing to eat. There were two teenage SS brutes in charge. When it rained I wanted to put a can out of an opening to catch the water--I was dying of thirst--but my companions wouldn't let me. I risked death. It was February and raining heavily.

"So we arrived at the camp. When I saw all my companions with their heads shaved, I couldn't help laughing. There were so many different shapes. I tried not to cry when they shaved mine. I had beautiful long hair. Now they put us to work levelling the earth. The work of ants! We suffered from hunger, from brutalities. It was a nightmare. That's how it was. Then the Americans

approached. The Germans marched us from the camp in columns. It was cold, raining. It was February I think. . . or March. I've forgotten the dates but it doesn't matter. With a companion I escaped to the woods. We threw ourselves flat out on the side of the road on a black, moonless night. My head was in a puddle but it didn't matter. When we heard the column marching off my heart beat so. The sense of deliverance--of being saved--was the strongest emotion I have ever experienced."

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Péjot finally located American soldiers but her troubles did not end there. She and her friend were nearly raped by drunken American soldiers who invited them to celebrate the Allied victory. Because they were French, they were presumed to be women of loose virtue. When asked why she resumed Resistance work after having been arrested and released twice, she explained that it was normal. You were with others of your 'family.'

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"Fear didn't exist. Besides, the Resistance was stronger than we were. There were our comrades. You found them again. You could not do otherwise. I didn't wake up one morning and say: 'I'm going to join the Resistance.' No, you were gradually caught up in it. All our group thought alike. The Germans were there. Something had to be done. I didn't want to save France just like that. You got caught up in it. My sister was arrested somewhat later, at Toulouse. She spent a few weeks in prison, but a French prison. She wasn't deported."

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France Pējot was young, attractive, and well brought up (bien élevée). During each arrest she played the role that would be expected of a young woman of her background. Although very frightened, she found that she could assume disguises and improvise plausible explanations. Pējot also discovered the ability to keep calm and respond appropriately during harrowing and dangerous encounters, and even to help keep the family store going until she was obliged to go underground. She was more intimidated by having to assume a role of intimacy with Lévy when the police came to her apartment to arrest her. Her irrepressible humor stayed with her in the darkest moments.

After the war Pējot married, then divorced <sup>Maurice Jarre</sup> a movie producer. <sup>musical score composer</sup>  
Their son Jean-Michel Jarre has ~~had~~ a very successful career as <sup>(Dr. Zivago, Lawrence of Arabia)</sup> composer and music producer of international renown. He married actress Charlotte Rampling. The state of Texas engaged him to <sup>concert-spectacular on the Houston skyline</sup> organize a ~~sound and light program~~ in Houston to mark the state's hundred and fiftieth anniversary <sup>(1.3 million people attended the event)</sup>. Recently Jean-Michel was named a UNESCO good-will ambassador. With her talent, his mother might well have had an acting career of her own. Instead, she still plays down her Resistance roles. (3)

(3). Interviews with France Pējot, June 1983 and June 1986.