

# Children's Evacuation Inside Wartime France<sup>1</sup>

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In November 1944, Prefect Clément Vasserot of the Creuse commented on his *département's* welcome of around 8,500 child evacuees across the past eighteen months:

L'ambiance champêtre, le calme, les solides vertus des paysans ont fort heureusement réagi sur nos enfants parfois hélas énervés. [...] Des préoccupations nouvelles, des problèmes intéressants ont élargi les pensées et augmenté la réflexion des enfants. Chez certains, l'assimilation est totale, pour la quasi-unanimité elle est excellente. Nous pensons que pour une faible minorité l'ambiance familiale paysanne a été préférable à celle laissée dans la Seine.<sup>2</sup>

How well does this very positive overview reflect children's experiences of this evacuation? It seems something of a twenty-first century commonplace to take the separation of children from

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<sup>2</sup> Archives départementales de la Creuse (ADC), 288W 43.1: Prefect Clément Vasserot, 'Rapport sur les conditions matérielles et morales des enfants', 4 November 1944.

their parents as necessarily damaging; this position is indeed supported by a great deal of research, particularly from the Second World War onwards.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the principle of keeping families together underpins contemporary refugee management practices: psychologist Derek Silove writes that ‘maintaining the integrity of the family should be a cornerstone of policies to protect children in war zones’.<sup>4</sup> Studies of British and Finnish wartime child evacuees in their adulthood attest to complex and lasting psychological problems in many cases, caused by distress and abuse during the evacuation process. Yet such negative consequences are by no means universal; researchers have also pointed to opportunities for learning, growth and development if the child was well cared for.<sup>5</sup> This article aims to bring contemporary archival data into dialogue with retrospective oral narratives in order to explore a latent archival bias: the archival sources reveal in large part the extremities of experience: the very good or the very bad. Using examples of two oral history narratives which I recorded in July 2018 with Françoise and Christian in the rural *département* of the Creuse, I show the value of

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<sup>3</sup> In her work on French and British attitudes to childrearing viewed through the lens of evacuation, Laura Lee Downs states that contemporary anxieties over separation were peculiarly British; the French tended to believe there was a positive gain for the child. See Laura Lee Downs, ‘Milieu social ou milieu familial? Theories and practices of childrearing among the popular classes in twentieth-century France and Britain: the case of evacuation (1939– 45)’, *Family and Community History*, 8:1 (2005), 49–65, and ‘Au revoir les enfants. Wartime evacuation and the politics of childhood in France and Britain’, *History Workshop Journal*, 82:1 (2016), 121–50. By contrast, contemporary paediatric, psychological and psychoanalytic investigations into the problems evacuated children faced in Britain tended to support concerns and entrenched ideas about attachment – developing via John Bowlby and Donald Winnicott – which continue to dominate paediatric psychology, extending beyond Britain. See Dorothy Burlingham & Anna Freud, *Young Children in Wartime* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1942); Dorothy Burlingham & Anna Freud, *Infants without Families* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1944); and for retrospective analysis, Michal Shapira, *The War Inside: Child Psychoanalysis and the Democratic Self in Britain, 1930-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). Psychological studies include James S. M. Rusby & Fiona Tasker, ‘Childhood temporary separation: long-term effects of the British evacuation of children during World War 2 on older adults’ attachment styles’, *Attachment & Human Development*, 10:2 (2008), 207-21.

<sup>4</sup> Derek Silove, ‘Should children be evacuated during times of war?’ *British Medical Journal*, 350, 5 Jan. 2005, unpaginated < doi: <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.g7824> >

<sup>5</sup> James S. M. Rusby & Fiona Tasker, ‘Long-term effects of the British evacuation of children during World War 2 on their adult mental health’, *Aging and Mental Health*, 13:3 (2009), 391–404 (pp. 400, 401).

complicating the story told by the archives with the everyday detail, emotional resonance and ambiguous outcomes that subjective and personal narratives provide.

In historical terms, little attention has been paid to the evacuation of children in France during the Second World War, largely because of an understandable focus on the ‘headline’ stories of resistance, collaboration, occupation and the deportation of Jews and others. It has been estimated that around 215,000 children were evacuated by the French State in response to the Allies’ air campaign;<sup>6</sup> hundreds of thousands more were sent privately, or through other organizations.<sup>7</sup> In March 1942, the Royal Air Force (RAF) had bombed an industrial target for the first time: Renault’s factories in the Parisian suburb of Boulogne-Billancourt, being used by the Germans to manufacture military vehicles. Just over a year later in April 1943, the United States Army Air Forces (USAAF) struck the same target, again killing hundreds and rendering thousands more homeless. At this point, there was still no coherent national plan for evacuation *à froid*, that is, in advance of air raids. This was despite continuous protests from mayors petitioning the Vichy authorities for greater protection against the Allies’ increasingly heavy attacks on strategic naval, supply, transportation and industrial targets.<sup>8</sup> After the attack on Renault in March 1942, *zones menacées* were designated around key industrial and military targets, and schemes elaborated for their evacuation; but this was not strictly implemented and

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<sup>6</sup> Andrew Knapp, *Les Français sous les bombes alliées* (Paris: Tallandier, 2014), p. 290, citing Service Historique de l’Armée de l’Air (SHAA), 3D/44/1: Service Interministériel de protection contre les événements de guerre (SIPEG), Note technique sur les évacuations, undated (early 1944).

<sup>7</sup> See Lindsey Dodd, *French Children Under the Allied Bombs, 1940-1945: An Oral History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), ch. 8, for a discussion of some of these different means, which include the Fondation Guynemer, the Swiss Secours aux Enfants, the Comité Lyon-Brest and the collaborationist Comité ouvrier de secours immédiat (COSI). See Chelsea Sambells’s article in this issue for details of the Swiss charities which aided French children.

<sup>8</sup> Archives municipales et communautaires de Brest (AMCB), 4H 4.34: ‘Mémoire présenté à Monsieur le Maréchal Pétain, Chef de l’État Français, et à Monsieur Pierre Laval, Président du Conseil, par Monsieur Pierre Courant, Maire du Havre, au nom des Maires des Villes côtières bombardées du Nord et de l’Ouest’, 16 May 1942; AMCB, 4H 4.34: ‘Procès-verbal de la réunion des maires des villes côtières bombardées’, 10 April 1943.

no unifying body was set up.<sup>9</sup> In summer 1942, prefects were instructed by Vichy to prepare for ‘massive’ evacuations *à froid*.<sup>10</sup> Yet nothing happened: the destruction of Lorient, for example, in January 1943, was *followed* by a chaotic, mass evacuation *à chaud*.<sup>11</sup> This prompted the creation of the Service interministériel de protection contre les événements de guerre (SIPEG), which was given responsibility for establishing and coordinating practical measures to protect civilians from increasing violence, as the French theatre of war – the Germans’ gateway to the Atlantic and the Allies’ prospective landing point – heated up.<sup>12</sup>

In late March 1943, Prefect Jacques-Henry of the Creuse (who preceded Vasserot in the post) journeyed to Paris to participate in a meeting organised by the SIPEG to discuss shifting children out of the capital due to poor food supply and increasing hunger and malnutrition. On 4 April, while he was there, the USAAF bombed Renault on 4 April; the meeting rapidly shifted its focus, as the minutes attest:

l’idée première d’une évacuation de la population scolaire du département de la Seine était surtout motivée par les difficultés du ravitaillement mais [. . .] depuis lors, le bombardement de la banlieue Ouest du 4 avril a fait apparaitre la nécessité de procéder, en premier lieu, à l’évacuation des localités particulièrement menacées par les bombardements aériens.<sup>13</sup>

Jacques-Henry had already made enquiries into lodging undernourished *petits Parisiens* in his department, and spoke up straight away: the surveys the Préfecture had conducted showed that

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<sup>9</sup> Archives départementales du Nord (ADN), 1W 123: Secretary-General of Police (Rivalland) to all prefects, 3 April 1942.

<sup>10</sup> Archives départementales du Calvados, 9W 99: Minister of the Interior (Laval) to all prefects, 1 February 1944, cites circular 123 of 29 July 1942.

<sup>11</sup> AMCB, 4H 4.34: ‘Procès-verbal de la réunion des maires des villes côtières bombardées’, 10 April 1943.

<sup>12</sup> ADN, 1W 1482: Minister of Interior (Laval) to all Prefects, 15 February 1943.

<sup>13</sup> ADC, 288W 43.1: Minutes of conference of 7 April 1943 (Préfecture of the Seine) concerning evacuation of Parisian school population.

the *département* could take 5,000 children straight away into family placements. He was the only prefect to have already made these preparations; Prefects Tery from the Haute-Saône and Arnaud from the Yonne hoped to make use of their *colonies de vacances* to take evacuees, but the latter promised to seek family placements too. Provision in the Creuse meant that the school population of Boulogne-Billancourt – around 5,000 children – could be moved fairly rapidly, and that ‘l’expérience du département de la Creuse servirait de modèle pour les départs ultérieurs’.<sup>14</sup> The first convoy of around 1,200 children arrived in Guéret on 24 April 1943, twenty days after the air raid. All were from Boulogne-Billancourt. During May, thousands more arrived, from Boulogne-Billancourt and other industrial Parisian suburbs – Asnières, Courbevoie, Colombes, Clamart, Gennevilliers, Ivry, Puteaux, Suresnes – as well as the *arrondissements*; yet more turned up in spring 1944 as the Allied bombing intensified. In total, the Creuse took in around 8,500 children from the Paris region.<sup>15</sup> Some stayed a few months, some several years, and some were permanently adopted.

I became interested in child evacuation during my research on the Allied bombing of France, which took Boulogne-Billancourt as a case study. In the municipal archives, there were several boxes of documents relating to the evacuation of the town’s children to various places in France, wherein the Creuse featured heavily; the first six convoys of children leaving Boulogne-Billancourt between April and July 1943 went to the Creuse. I decided to focus on this connection, and so examined further archival materials in the Archives départementales in Guéret. While both archives contained valuable material about the structural organisation of evacuation, I found them inadequate in revealing much about experience. Moreover, what was

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<sup>14</sup> ADC, 288W 43.1: Minutes of conference of 7 April 1943 (Préfecture of the Seine) concerning evacuation of Parisian school population.

<sup>15</sup> ADC, 288W 43.1: Note cites 8,585 Parisian refugee children in June 1944 (18 June 1945). Precise numbers are difficult to pin down. Perhaps 1,500 children from Boulogne-Billancourt went to the Creuse; others went to the other reception departments: Lot, Doubs, Allier, Yonne, Cher-et-Loir and Haute-Saône.

there relating to qualitative experience had a certain bias: the archives hold evidence of situations which needed to be brought to the attention of the authorities: problems with family placements, with accommodation, with the children's health, with their behaviour; problems with inadequate clothing, shortage of school equipment, police reports of alleged abuse; and the converse: excellent weight gain and improved health, excellent relations with excellent foster families, letters of praise and thanks. In order to understand something of the more everyday quality of children's experiences, I therefore collected memories and written memoirs from people who had either been child evacuees in the Creuse, or who had been children in the foster families which took them in. The stories I collected include seven former child evacuees, four children in foster families, five other child refugees, and one former primary school teacher. It was my contention that children's experiences – like everyday life more broadly – were likely to be less just 'good' or 'bad', and would be more equivocal.

In what follows, I bring together archival evidence, and the oral history narratives of two individuals, Françoise and Christian, to show the more nuanced, subjective and affective texture of experience which appears when different kinds of evidence are placed side by side.<sup>16</sup> My aim is not to use archival evidence to confirm or disprove the oral histories, nor the oral histories to contradict the archives. Indeed, neither source tells anything like a 'full story'; the 'memory truth' and the 'archival truth' reflect and refract each other, sometimes corresponding and sometimes diverging. Oral history gives us insight into how large parts of populations live significant political and historical events. These events often sit behind the main action of daily lives, rumbling away with such power that their tremors and convulsions stretch outwards from their epicentres; sometimes they intrude so much as to alter life courses, but not always directly.

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with Françoise, 7 July 2017 (Creuse); interview with Christian 7 July 2017 (Creuse); both interviews conducted by Lindsey Dodd. I used a semi-structured interview technique, outlining my main areas of interest, but permitting interviewees to develop their own narratives in ways meaningful to them. The interview technique is conversational, non-intrusive and variable.

This is very different from the experience of those parts of the population whose lives were directly affected by the violence of war, by the terror of persecution or the struggle for survival; yet I would suggest that while it might be the less dramatic one, the indirect experience of war is more likely to be the majority experience. I do not claim that the stories of Françoise or Christian are either representative or typical; they should be seen as telling cases – that is, cases which help us enquire into and learn about the past, rather than ones which prove or disprove a hypothesis.<sup>17</sup>

Christian was born in November 1937 and grew up in the Parisian suburb of Colombes, to the northwest of the city. He did not know what his father's occupation was at the time, but he recalled a district of factories and HLM apartment blocks. He was the third of four brothers; the eldest two were also evacuated, but they went to North Africa. He remembered little of the war before his evacuation in 1943 at the age of five years old, although he had some flash memories of bomb craters in the street, and being taken down to the cellar during air raid alerts. He responded to my article in the local press and contacted me to be interviewed about his experience in July 2017. I interviewed him at his second home in the Creuse. He enthusiastically told me his whole story in an eight-minute monologue at the beginning of the interview; after that I was able to ask further questions about different aspects of his experiences which interested me. We spoke for around an hour, and towards the end he showed me a scrapbook of photos, maps and pictures of the village of Issoudun-Létrieux, where he lived during the two years of his evacuation, superimposed with cartoon animals whose speech bubbles explained different parts of his life: he had compiled this for his grandchildren to learn about this important part of his life.

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<sup>17</sup> Bent Flyvbjerg, 'Five misunderstandings about case-study research', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12:2 (2006), 219–45.

Françoise was born in August 1937, in Orléans. She had an older brother born in 1932 and a sister born in 1940. Her father worked for the PTT (Postes, Télégraphes et Téléphones) in telephone engineering. The family soon moved to the unoccupied zone, partly because of the threat of bombing. They settled in the village of Saint-Sulpice-le-Guérétois, about six kilometres from Guéret, where I interviewed Françoise. The family's evacuee Marcelle arrived in 1943; her *fiche d'évacuation* tells us that she was born in 1931, and was evacuated from the Paris suburb of Issy.<sup>18</sup> Marcelle's father was of Indochinese origin, so Françoise said that she and her siblings were initially wonderstruck by her appearance: the shape of her eyes and her long straight hair were unusual. The number of 'non-French' surnames among the thousands of *fiches d'évacuation* is testament to the large population of recent immigrants in Paris who had no rural relatives to whom their children could be sent for their health and safety. Our interview lasted a couple of hours; we spoke of the war, of her childhood, of Marcelle, and particularly of Françoise's deceased husband – an Algerian man whom she had married in 1959, a time when mixed marriages in the Creuse were extremely rare. Françoise had an excellent memory, and spoke with great clarity and verve about her own life, freely admitting that there were, of course, very many things that she did not know because of her young age during the war, and particularly about Marcelle's experience. But, with the help of her brother, with whom she had spoken before our interview, she provided an interesting perspective on their world as a host family.

Both the evacuated children arrived in the Creuse in 1943, Christian in April or May (he is not certain), and Marcelle in May. The local press had played an important role that spring in persuading rural people of their charitable and national duty to become foster parents

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<sup>18</sup> ADC, 288 W 50: *Fiches d'évacuation* were completed for each child evacuated to the Creuse from April 1943 onwards. Each gives the child's name, date of birth, his or her arrival date, the address in Paris, and the name and address of the host family in the Creuse. Some contain further details. Although there are thousands of them in the archives, some are missing: I could not find one for Christian.



to urban evacuees; children were not billeted on families, but there was a fair amount of emotive persuasion. As the first convoy arrived in Guéret in late April 1943, local generosity was applauded as a ‘belle manifestation de solidarité nationale qui n’est possible que grâce à l’élan spontané avec lequel les Creusois ont répondu à l’appel qui leur a été adressé’.<sup>19</sup> Across the spring of 1943, each new convoy was announced in the press, and praises were sung, to persuade more families to open their doors. On 8 May, *Le Courrier du Centre* wrote of the children’s plight, but patted its readers on the back, hoping to persuade others to share in the self-congratulations:

Un nouvel exode, moins en débâcle que le premier, mais tout aussi navrant : celui des tout-petits, chassés de leurs maisons par les bombardements de nos ex-alliés. La Creuse, le premier de tous les départements français, a ouvert ses logis et ses cœurs pour accueillir cinq mille de ces innocents que l’on veut arracher au massacre.<sup>20</sup>

From the press, therefore, we understand the population as willing and keen to take the *petits Parisiens* into their homes. Intercepted letters and phone calls, anonymized at the time, reveal more candid views than those found in the controlled and censored press. One person wrote to a relative, ‘Nous allons certainement en avoir. Pauvres petits et pauvres parents!’<sup>21</sup> An intercepted phone call from someone in Gouzon (Creuse) also showed pity and goodwill towards the children: ‘Ces pauvres gosses, c’est pourtant bien un devoir de prendre un de ces petits.’<sup>22</sup> In many cases, there was a great deal of sympathy shown, and the fact that so many were placed fairly rapidly demonstrates local goodwill.

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<sup>19</sup> ADC, 9BIB 129.74: *Le Courrier du Centre*, 22 April 1943.

<sup>20</sup> ADC, 9BIB 129.74: *Le Courrier du Centre*, 8 May 1943.

<sup>21</sup> ADC, 288W 43.1: Extract of intercepted letter between correspondents in Magnat l’Étrange (Creuse) and 10th *arrondissement* (Paris), 17 April 1943.

<sup>22</sup> ADC, 288W 43.1: Extract from intercepted telephone call between callers in Gouzon (Creuse) and Bellegarde (Creuse), 21 April 1943.

However, the archives also show us the other side. Another intercepted phone call, this time between callers in Gouzougnat and Chénérailles (both Creuse) reveals misgivings:

Chénérailles: Tu vas en prendre un, toi?

Gouzougnat: Je ne sais pas, si on tombe sur quelqu'un de bien ça va ; mais autrement....

Chénérailles : Mais des enfants c'est toujours bien, il n'y a que les grandes personnes qui font mal.

Gouzougnat: Oui, mais....

Chénérailles: Moi, j'ai des enfants, j'en prendrai un.

Gouzougnat: C'est pas une obligation.

Chénérailles: Je considère comme un devoir.<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, among the local population and the administrators, a criticism began to emerge: 'c'est surtout parmi les classes moyennes et parfois parmi les malheureux, que se sont trouvés le plus de volontaires pour accueillir les pauvres gosses de la Région Parisienne.'<sup>24</sup> Wealthier inhabitants and those without children were accused of shirking their duty, while 'des fermiers qui ont trois ou quatre enfants en prennent un et même deux'.<sup>25</sup> An intercepted letter from early May 1943 remarked harshly :

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<sup>23</sup> ADC, 288W 43.1: Extract from intercepted telephone call between callers in Chénérailles (Creuse) and Gouzougnat (Creuse), 13 April 1943.

<sup>24</sup>ADC, 44W 35: Service de renseignements généraux (Creuse), report for week 19-25 April 1943, dated 22 April 1943.

<sup>25</sup> ADC, 288W 43.1: Extract from intercepted telephone call between callers in Chéniers (Creuse) and Bonnat (Creuse), 24 April 1943

A noter que nos gros propriétaires qui sont tous millionnaires à l'heure actuelle, n'en voulaient pas et qu'il a fallu leur en mettre d'office. Ah nos paysans ne s'améliorent pas pendant ces périodes critiques, leur cupidité et leur égoïsme se donne libre cours.<sup>26</sup>

In the district around Boussac (Creuse), administrators found more places for children in the town than in surrounding villages, and noted:

De nombreuses personnes ont fait ressortir qu'outre le désagrément que cet hébergement peut comporter, le ravitaillement est trop difficile, trop couteux, que l'habillement est loin d'être négligeable et même que l'enfant peut être malade et contaminer la famille.<sup>27</sup>

And after the children arrived, the complaints, both private and addressed to the authorities multiplied: the children were sickly, flea-ridden, ill, they wet the bed, they were ill-shod, their parents had not sent them with sufficient provisions – despite the good wages they were thought to be earning at Renault – their ration cards were missing, and so on.

So the archives here contain the encouraging (controlled) newspaper reports, and the intercepted evidence of positive and negative public opinion – this is what interested administrators at the time. They are unlikely to provide us with much of the nuance of personal and interpersonal decision making.<sup>28</sup> Françoise was only six at the time her parents decided to

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<sup>26</sup> ADC, 288W 43.1: Extract of intercepted letter between correspondents in La Brionne (Creuse) and Lachapelle-Saint-Pierre (Oise), 3 May 1943.

<sup>27</sup> ADC, 44W 35: Monthly report, Cantonal Administrative Agent in Boussac to Prefect of the Creuse, 19 April 1943.

<sup>28</sup> As Nicole Dombrowski Risser has shown to excellent effect in her book *France Under Fire: German Invasion, Civilian Flight and Family Survival during World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), it is possible for institutional archives to contain rich, qualitative detail. In her case, she encountered letters from women to the authorities detailing their families' conditions after 1940 and demanding support. I had expected to find in the archives the weekly reports which the cantonal

take in a Parisian evacuee. She did not know why they had chosen to do so; as we will see, they had something of a full house already. However, she did comment – and perhaps the full house bears this out – that ‘ma mère était très accueillante’. Françoise’s family had relatively recently moved to the Creuse from the Occupied Zone; perhaps her parents were also therefore motivated by their own prior experiences of air raid threat and anxiety. The family’s response to Marcelle’s arrival, however, shows something of the inner complexity of taking in another child. Of Marcelle, Françoise said:

c’est une petite fille qui avait une douzaine d’années, et Maman était un peu ennuyée parce qu’elle avait demandé une petite, dans mes âges, plutôt, de l’âge de – , voilà. Or on nous a envoyé une petite – , qui était presque une petite jeune fille. Et elle avait, elle – , nous avons un garçon à la maison d’onze ans. Elle s’ennuyait un peu, Maman, de cette petite fille, déjà développée, avec ce garçon d’onze ans, qui grandissait aussi. Elle aurait préférée quelqu’un de plus jeune. Bon.

The difficulties arising from Marcelle’s allocation to this household demonstrates contemporary concerns over propriety and modesty which were certainly compounded in rural homes with few rooms and little privacy:

une petite fille de six, sept ans, vous la lavez dans la bassine, une fille de douze ans, on ne peut pas la laver dans la bassine. Donc ça l’a un peu embêtée, mais, enfin, elle a fait contre mauvais sort bon cœur.

Here, the will to take in an evacuee was complicated by the problems which arose when the particular child proved hard to accommodate. Whether Marcelle was aware of these anxieties,

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inspectors of evacuee children across the Creuse were supposed to submit to the Préfecture, and which I expected to be full of equally rich material: very, very few were extant.

or felt this lack of privacy, is not clear, although it formed an unprompted and recurrent motif in Françoise's discussion of her stay; I wondered whether talk was in the air at the time, picked up by the little girl and her brother. Marcelle's *fiche d'évacuation* shows that she was moved from Françoise's home to another family in the same village after eighteen months.<sup>29</sup>

Christian's case is different, but also suggests that taking or not taking in an evacuee relied on factors beyond a simplistic characterization of generosity or selfishness. He described the moment that the children were selected by local people when they arrived in the village:

Donc je suis arrivé à Issoudun-Létrieux, où là, évidemment, les gens venaient pour choisir – on va dire le mot, choisir – prendre des enfants. Évidemment, les gens prenaient les enfants les plus costauds au départ, pour les travaux de champs et tout, parce qu'on était à la campagne, et qu'il fallait bien donner un petit coup de main. Donc moi, je suis resté le dernier. J'avais cinq ans seulement. [...] Parce que c'est comme une charge, de prendre un enfant de cinq ans [...] Dans les fermes quand on a un enfant, il faut se rendre utile, il faut, il ne faut pas être un poids, donc moi, j'étais un poids.

While it is fair to say that a number of criticisms emerge from the archives relating to farmers using evacuee children as unpaid labourers on their farms,<sup>30</sup> Christian rightly acknowledged the pressing needs of farms which were undermanned due to the number of prisoners-of-war held in Germany, and still further by men requisitioned for the STO. The instructions issued to teachers made clear that:

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<sup>29</sup> ADC, 288W 50: Fiche d'évacuation (Marcelle F).

<sup>30</sup> ADC, 987W 110: Extract from report by Cantonal Inspector Kilian, 10 March 1944.

les petits Parisiens doivent être traités comme les autres enfants de la famille, aider dans la mesure de leur forces aux travaux de la maison et des champs et ne pas se considérer comme des ‘estivants’.<sup>31</sup>

Tired, hungry and alone after a long journey, clinging to his baggage, little Christian was not to know this. And as in Marcelle’s case, his acceptance into the foster family which took him was not unbegrudging:

Et le maire de la commune, lui, c’était le dernier qui devait choisir un enfant par le fait, puisque ces administrés avaient priorité sur lui [...] Et évidemment, le dernier, c’était moi. Et là, il n’était pas tellement chaud au départ pour – , et la femme du maire à ce moment-là dit: ‘Tu ne vas pas quand-même laisser repartir cet enfant sous les bombardements!’ Et ce qui fait que j’ai été pris dans la famille du maire de la commune.

What grew into a powerful example of kindness and generosity towards the child of strangers did not begin as such. Thus the oral histories nuance the too-easy dichotomy of generosity and selfishness which the archives suggest. In both cases, the child was accompanied by a certain amount of grumbling on the part of the foster families.

Concerning evacuees’ living conditions, the archives again present us with a split view: on one hand, from press propaganda, trying to encourage more parents to evacuate their children, and more foster families to volunteer. Reporting on the arrival of the first convoy, a certain view of the children and their now-safe futures was painted by *Le Courrier*’s reporter:

‘c’est vrai qu’il n’y aura plus d’alertes?’ m’a demandé, avec une angoisse que m’a fait frémir, un blondinet de huit ans, aux yeux si tristes, aux joues si pâles. Et comme je le rassurais : ‘Alors, on va pouvoir coucher dans un vrai lit tous les soirs?’

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<sup>31</sup> ADC, 987W 110: Primary School Inspector (Guéret) to Inspector General of Primary Education in the Seine, 5 July 1943.

The more abundant food of the countryside, as well as the calm skies, were key selling points of the evacuation adventure, but also the better living conditions: a proper bed, not a shared one or a makeshift one, and night after night of uninterrupted beneficial sleep, awaited the children. On the other hand, the archives once more reveal the contrary: complaints and criticisms. In July 1943 Inspector Huré surveyed the sleeping conditions of eighty children in the commune of La Chapelle-Taillefert (Creuse): two evacuees, he wrote, were sleeping together in a bed, another girl was sharing a bed with the daughter of the family, another boy was sleeping in the grandmother's bedroom although he had a bed for himself. Many slept in the 'pièce commune' or 'avec les parents nourriciers'. In one case, the remark that a seven-year-old boy was sleeping on a mattress on the ground provoked further enquiry.<sup>32</sup> The mayor of Boulogne-Billancourt wrote, chastising the inspector, insisting that the boy and his sister 'doivent coucher dans un lit et non sur une paille posée à terre', and that the boy and his sister be removed – despite Huré's pleas that their carers were 'des braves femmes' who fed the children well, had good relations with the children's parents and were positively viewed by their neighbours.<sup>33</sup> Sleeping conditions were just one of the complaints levelled against the host families; others included overworking evacuee children, and, indeed, having an unpaid 'domestique Parisien'.<sup>34</sup> There are a few cases where foster parents were accused of physical or sexual abuse of their evacuee; and others, it should be added, where the abuse was at the hands of the biological parents.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Archives municipales de Boulogne-Billancourt, 6H 18: Report of Cantonal Inspector Huré in La Chapelle-Taillefert, 20-24 July 1943.

<sup>33</sup> AMBB, 6H 18: Huré to Mayor of Boulogne-Billancourt, 4 August 1943; Mayor of Boulogne-Billancourt to Huré. The children's *fiches d'évacuation* show that the boy was moved on 1 September 1943 and his younger sister on 16 October, to different households in the same hamlet (ADC, 288W 57).

<sup>34</sup> ADC, 987W 110: Extract from report by Cantonal Inspector Kilian, 10 March 1944.

<sup>35</sup> E.g. ADC, 288W 43.1: Report of Huré (cantonal inspector), 16 September 1944; and ADC, 288W 43.1: Denunciation of Monsieur M., anonymous and undated; letter from Monsieur M. to the Prefect, 11 November 1944; police report and witness statements, 13 November 1944. A police report (ADC, 987W 110) dated 17 January 1944 provides the further example of a ten-year-old boy who ran away from his biological parents, back to his foster family, complaining of mistreatment at his parents' hands.

The oral history narratives provide more detail. For Christian, despite lukewarm beginnings, the advantages of his new life were abundant. At first, the little boy was anxious and, he said,

il y avait un lit, mais les lits, vous savez, en fer, il y avait ce lit, donc ils avaient mis ce lit dans leur chambre à eux au début, et je dormais dans leur chambre dans ce lit [...] et après j'avais une chambre à moi tout seul, bien sûr. Ah oui, oui.

This was a far cry from the HLM where the family had lived in Paris: four brothers, a couple of rooms, the sixth floor, few trees and little greenery. He compared it to his new world:

Ah oui, ça n'avait rien à voir! Parce qu'en bas on avait la maison, avec la cuisinière, c'était le lieu permanent, comme dans toutes les fermes, et devant la porte on avait les poules, les canards, les cochons, enfin, tout, les chevaux, et après, à l'étage, il y avait les chambres, là, il y avait des chambres pour tout le monde.

And with the abundance of a relatively large and well-run farm, Christian's life in the Creuse corresponded very much to the pictures painted in the press – although it should be pointed out that he had not come from an impoverished family. He emphasised the advantages of evacuation for him:

Moi, je n'ai jamais connu, durant cette période de guerre, de restrictions. On avait du bon fromage blanc, avec de la crème, et du sucre, même de la confiture dessus. On faisait des gâteaux, des tartes aux pommes – c'était le gâteau courant à la maison – et puis des bons poulets avec de la bonne purée, avec du bon jus au beurre et tout.

Indeed, he commented that it was on his return to Paris at the end of the war that he felt 'traumatisé' by the sudden restrictions. In spite of a slightly shaky start, Christian's evacuation experience was exemplary and endorsed the benefits of removing children from the cities, not



just for nutritional reasons or air raid protection, but because of the opportunities for learning and growth.

It is impossible to know, from the interview with Françoise, what Marcelle thought of her evacuation experience. But from a material point of view, there may have been cause for complaint. Françoise described the family home as a warm but crowded space:

Une vieille maison. Deux grandes pièces. Vous aviez la rue, deux, trois petites marches, une petite courette, une maison basse avec deux très grandes pièces. La première pièce, on entrait, Maman avait mis la table de la cuisine et les chaises. Il y avait une grande cuisinière avec – , qui donnait de l'eau chaude. [...] On y avait mis les lits des enfants, donc moi je dormais avec ma sœur, mon frère dormait à côté de moi. Il y avait un buffet au fond, Maman avait tiré un grand rideau sur le côté pour mettre les provisions [...] Et dans l'autre pièce, Maman avait fait la salle à manger, donc la chaise, table, buffet, et sa chambre. C'était tout dans la même pièce, une grande chambre avec une grande armoire.

Not only were the five members of Françoise's immediate family living in these two rooms, but they were joined by a young uncle who had fled the forced labour draft and was hiding out with them, and an older adolescent cousin from Juvisy whose family had sent her south for better food. Françoise said, laughing:

Dans deux pièces, alors on ajoute des matelas – , et qu'arrivait Marcelle! Maman a pris la petite Parisienne, donc nous voilà huit dans deux pièces! Alors moi, avec ma sœur, lui [her brother] dans un petit lit, on avait mis un autre petit lit devant notre lit, elle [Marcelle] dormait là la nuit.

Françoise spoke in amused wonder at the number of people crammed into this space, where they would be joined in the evening by neighbours come to *veiller* – the rural tradition of evening visiting, sharing the fireside, basket-making, playing cards, and passing on the news.

Yet perhaps this busy household was the cause of concern; I was unable to find any correspondence specifically about this case in the archives, which are patchy. Perhaps it might account – we can only speculate – for Marcelle eventually being moved to a new foster family in the same village. Françoise spoke of the visits from Marcelle’s mother, who did not appear to get on well with her own. She said first, that the woman ‘ne donnait pas l’impression d’être d’une famille ouvrière [...] Elle faisait un peu la Parisienne’. At another moment, she spoke of the children’s make-do-and-mend clothing, saying ‘Ah, on n’était pas très élégant, hein. Bon. On s’en foutait, de toute façon’ : but perhaps Marcelle’s mother did care. Françoise wondered whether

peut-être qu’elle trouvait que le milieu familial, avec tout ce monde – , bon. Enfin. La gamine, elle était chez nous, elle mangeait bien, elle était nourrie, logée, alors qu’à Paris, ils crevaient de faim.

There is mild indignation here, that the woman might have turned up her nose when her daughter was living what Françoise remembers as a good life. There may well be a contradiction of perception. Neither the archival evidence given by Marcelle’s *fiche d’évacuation* nor the remembered impressions of Françoise or her brother can tell us what Marcelle or her mother thought. But the narrative suggests certain tensions between town and country as lived by the protagonists themselves, not just reported by an outside observer.

To finish this discussion, it is worth looking at the nature of the long-term relations built out of evacuation. Prefect Clément Vasserot concluded the introduction to his October 1944 report on the evacuation of the *petits réfugiés* with the words:

Le rapprochement entre citadins et campagnards est un fait. L'avenir dira s'il résistera à la vie prochaine. Rares, très rares sont les cas d'incompréhension totale. Nombreux sont les liens d'amitiés qui se sont noués. Souhaitons qu'ils durent longtemps.

Any response here cannot emanate from contemporary archival sources: static, frozen in time. While retrospective oral histories are sometimes criticised because of the inaccuracies of memory, retrospect allows us what immediacy does not: the ability to interrogate the reverberations of past events across time. Remembering the past and commemorating the past is an ongoing, lived and personal phenomenon, not just a set of cultural and political activities played out on the public scene.<sup>36</sup> In this sense, the retrospective, subjective source provides a powerful means of learning about the impact of past events on lives over time.

In her forthright manner, Françoise spoke of Marcelle's departure. She said: 'Et quand elle est repartie, nous n'avons plus aucune nouvelle. Jamais.' It appeared that the cooling of relations between her mother and Marcelle's had precluded the knotting of the 'liens d'amitié' in any kind of lasting way. But she immediately corrected herself:

Mais, quand même si, bien des années après. Alors, donc, une fois, alors, nous habitons Guéret, moi j'avais déjà dix-sept, dix-huit ans, elle est venue ! Elle était mariée, elle avait déjà des enfants, et elle était enceinte. Ravissante. Elle était belle comme un cœur. [...] Donc elle est passée, donc, elle, comme elle était passée dans le coin, elle est venue voir Maman, bien sûr. Et elle est partie, et on ne s'est plus revue. [...] Je pense qu'elle a éprouvé le besoin – , vous savez, ça arrive, on a besoin un jour de refaire le chemin pour repartir.

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<sup>36</sup> I explore this further in 'Wartime rupture and reconfiguration in French family life: experience and legacy', *History Workshop Journal*, forthcoming 2019 [details will be provided on publication].

But this was not the last of Marcelle. When Françoise's mother died in 2000: 'coup de telephone, Marcelle nous téléphone [...] donc on a longuement discuté. Au téléphone.' She told Françoise: 'J'ai un bon souvenir, ta Maman s'est bien occupée de moi.' Françoise invited her to spend her holidays in the Creuse, but after that she heard no more from Marcelle. It seemed, and this was the case in several other interviews, that the evacuee was particularly grateful to the 'second mother' who had cared for them during those years.

Christian's future pathway might have pleased Clément Vasserot. Indeed, his experience in the Creuse represents one of many examples of evacuation – and, let us not forget, family separation – as a time of personal growth, development and great affection. He fell on his feet:

je suis gâté, choyé, il y avait un autre enfant dans cette famille qui avait quatre ans plus que moi, donc ça me faisait un grand frère. Et puis on allait travailler dans les champs, on emmenait les vaches aux champs, on gardait les champs – . Et puis j'avais la nostalgie de cette région, de la liberté, parce qu'il y avait une transition qui est quand-même très, très grande, d'attraper un enfant de cinq ans qui a entendu les bruits des sirènes la nuit, les *woooooou*, les bombardements, et d'un seul coup, le calme ici, vous voyez. La liberté, la liberté de pouvoir courir dans les champs, de partir –

This place was a revelation to him. He benefitted from the family atmosphere around him. The mayor and his wife consented to become his godparents, and, he said, 'je faisais indirectement partie de la famille après'. Every summer, he returned to spend two and a half months with his godparents. When he got engaged, he introduced his fiancée to them; and she – now his wife – told me after the interview that from the moment they met, 'déjà, c'était la Creuse, la Creuse, la Creuse. Il n'y avait pas question d'aller ailleurs!' He bought his second home there in 1979, and still divides his time between Paris and the Creuse – although his wife, daughter and

grandchildren live there permanently. Christian's experience of evacuation from the Paris suburbs provides an excellent example of a life shaped indirectly by the Second World War; and among the people I interviewed, he was not alone in this. Marcelle seems to have kept a more distant relationship with this part of her past, but for Christian, it shaped aspects of his future in ways that were unpredictable.

This article has explored some certain aspects of children's evacuation inside wartime France, taking the Creuse as a case study. While it only uses two people's oral history narratives, it does not seek to generalize from them about the past; this is a tiny, non-representative sample – yet it is nonetheless suggestive and revealing both in methodological terms, given that it complements the archival holdings and sensitizes us to their latent biases, and in historical terms because of the rich detail it provides of daily life and interpersonal relations in the past, and the impact of the past into the present. There is a tendency to conduct research – including oral history research – into the darker, and more dramatic, parts of the historical past; yet by also including those, such as Christian, whose war years were lived partly in pleasant and happy circumstances, we build a rounder picture of the varied impacts of war and violence on a population, and particularly on children. The nature of this evidence invites us also to think differently about how we interpret the past. Françoise's story provides an interesting challenge because without Marcelle's intervention, it is incomplete. But in its incomplete nature, it provokes questions which engender a rich speculation about the 'shared possibilities' of evacuation:<sup>37</sup> about what might or could have been the case. In this sense, the incomplete evidence acts as a stimulus to the historical imagination. In accepting to interview people about others and not just about themselves, I stepped knowingly into this

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<sup>37</sup> On the idea of shared possibilities, see Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (New York: SUNY Press, 1991), p. 137; also Lindsey Dodd, (2013) 'Small fish, big pond: using a single oral narrative to reveal broader social change', in ed. Joan Tumblety, *Memory and History: Understanding Memory as Source and Subject* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), pp. 34–49.

epistemological quicksand; recreating multiple perspectives on the past recognises the multiple ownerships of past events, their memories and their reverberations down the years.