Abstract

Renée Louise Weigle, the daughter-in-law of the first Socialist and the first Jewish premier of France, had sub-rented an apartment in a town two miles from where her father-in-law was jailed by the Vichy regime so that she could bring to him a hot meal. Daily she rode a bicycle to do that during the cold winter months. When her husband, Robert Blum, was being mistreated in a Nazi POW camp she went unannounced to the Turkish Ambassador and pleaded to have Turkey, a neutral country, intervene. She succeeded. Renée served as a member of the SFIO (Socialist Party) Executive Committee from 1944 to 1948.

André Léon Blum, (April 9th 1872 – March 30th 1950) the first Socialist and the first Jewish premier of France, had inaugurated his first Cabinet on June 4th 1936. Three years later, the New York Times reported on June 14th 1940 that it took the German armies all of nine days from the start of the invasion of France itself to reach Paris and that the French had already decided not to wage a street-by-street defense. In fact, France did not take a stand in defending any of her cities.

The Nazis paraded on Champs-Élysées, on the 14th of June only two days after crossing into France proper.

Nazi troops on Champs-Élysées, in Paris June 14th 1940

Léon Blum was born in the Paris Jewish community and attended the Lycée Henri IV. While in that high school he met the writer André Gide and published his first poems at the age of 17 in a journal they created. Blum then enrolled in the prestigious École Normale Supérieure in 1890. After graduation, wavering between studying law and literature he decided to study both at the Sorbonne, graduating in literature in 1890 and in law in 1894. He then worked as a government
lawyer while developing a second career as a literary critic, in particular as an authority on Goethe. He went on to become recognized as one of France's leading literary figures.

Blum had little interest in politics until the Dreyfus Affair of 1894, which had a traumatic effect on him as it did on many French Jews. Campaigning as a Dreyfusard brought him into contact with the socialist leader Jean Jaurès, whom he greatly admired. He began contributing to the socialist daily, L'Humanité, and joined the Socialist Party, then called the SFIO. Soon he was the party's main theoretician. Blum led the SFIO through the 1920s and 1930s, and was also editor of the party's new paper, Le Populaire. He was elected as Deputy for Narbonne in 1929, and was re-elected in 1932 and 1936. In 1935 all the parties of the left and the center formed the Popular Front, which at the elections of June 1936 won a sweeping victory. On February 13th, 1936, Blum was dragged from a car and almost beaten to death by a group of anti-Semites and royalists, but survived and was given the Premiership on June 4th of the same year.

When the Germans occupied France, “Blum spent the ten days following the news of the armistice secluded in the country home of friends in L’Armurier, near Toulouse. His friends and his daughter-in-law, Renée, pleaded with him to leave the country while it was still possible.” Blum made no effort to leave the country, despite the extreme danger he was in as a Jew and a socialist leader. He was arrested by the Vichy French in September and held until 1942, when he was put on trial on charges of treason, for having "weakened France's defences."

Blum’s trial had been stopped by the Germans in April 1942 because the eloquent, 70 year-old politician had exposed the treason charges against him for what they were—a ridiculous farce.
At the time of his trial, Blum was imprisoned at Chazeron an old castle situated in the commune of Loubeyrat in the French département of Puy-de-Dôme, three km (two miles) northwest of Châtel-Guyon. During his stay there “Water [froze] in the wash basin.” However because of its proximity to a place where she could find residence in a hotel “each day his [daughter-in-law,] Renée bicycled the four kilometers from Riom to carry a noonday meal for him.”

“On February 5, 1943, an agreement was … signed between the various metropolitan Resistance organizations and the Communist party which openly recognized the party and gave it a voice in the coordination of the metropolitan Resistance movement.” However “the Socialist leaders infuriated, threatened to withdraw from the Resistance organizations” When Blum was consulted, his daughter-in-law Renée acting as an intermediary, he restrained them from any divisive action.” (emphasis added)

In April 1943, the Germans deported Blum to Germany, where he was imprisoned in Buchenwald until April 1945. He was imprisoned in the section reserved for high-ranking prisoners. As the Allied armies approached Buchenwald, he was transferred to Dachau, near Munich, and in late April 1945, together with other notable inmates, to Tyrol. In the last weeks of the war the Nazi regime gave orders that he was to be executed, but the local authorities decided not to obey them. Blum was rescued by Allied troops in May 1945. While in prison he wrote his best known work, the essay À l’échelle Humaine (“For all mankind”). After the war Blum again served as Prime Minister of France, a position he held three different times.

Léon Blum’s son Robert who was born in Paris in 1902 married Renée Louise Weigle on March 29th 1926, in Petit-Saconnex (now Geneva). She was one year younger and they had at least one daughter - Catherine. Robert studied in the prestigious École Polytechnique de Paris and worked as engineer. He was president of the Hispano-Suiza airplanes Society and as an officer in the French Army; Robert was captured and imprisoned by the Germans at the Lübeck POW camp in Germany. On September 21st 1942, Renée Blum, an attractive woman by then in her late 30s, dressed in black as if she were attending a funeral called on the Turkish Embassy wanting to see the Ambassador Behiç Erkin himself and she called without an appointment. Despite her attempt to keep composure, she was quite distressed and obviously needed to discuss something of great importance.

The decision to meet with Mrs. Blum would have been difficult for most people as Léon Blum was still locked up in jail. Erkin knew it would be uncomfortable for his country to get involved with the internationally known Jewish socialist but without a moment of hesitation he ordered his Orderly, “Well, just don’t stand there, Zeki; show the woman in.” Assuming she had come to ask for help for her father-in-law whose situation was quite desperate in the hands of the Vichy French government, Erkin allowed her a few moments to gather her thoughts and catch
her breath. He had met Léon Blum only once, shortly after his arrival in Paris in September 1939 when he was installed as the new Turkish ambassador. But his assumption was wrong.

“The reason why I am here, Mr. Ambassador, has nothing to do with my father in law’s situation; that is, I’m here because of my husband. What is happening to my husband is causing my father-in-law even more stress than he already has.”

Trying to jog his memory for the bits and pieces he had heard about the Blum family, Erkin recalled that Léon Blum’s only son was a prisoner of war.

“My husband and the men captured with him are being tortured and held in isolation in a POW camp in Germany. My father-in-law fears that his son is being treated this way simply because his name is Blum….and that his fellow officers are suffering because they are with him.”

Now Erkin remembered. The camp she was talking about, Camp Oflag Xc, was one of the many camps built to house officers only. This particular camp was in Lubeck and held other French VIP notables such as historian Fernand Braudel and brothers Elie and Alain de Rothschild, sons of Robert de Rothschild.

“My father in law suggested I come here, explain the situation, and ask for your help.” Answering slowly, carefully, and considering each word Erkin replied, “Unfortunately, I’m not convinced my involvement would be beneficial nor have the political influence that you obviously desire. But dry your eyes and allow me to finish.”

Leaning forward to emphasize his words and looking directly into Renée’s eyes, Erkin explained his precarious position and his idea.

“During the process of protecting the rights of thousands of our citizens, it is imperative that we consider every detail with the extreme caution so we don’t ruin the delicate balance in our sensitive relations with the French and German authorities. We don’t have the luxury of making a wrong move in an environment where just one misstep can cost the lives of many people. At this stage, considering our involvement in other matters, it would be inappropriate for the ambassador of a neutral country to help the POW son of the former French Prime Minister who is imprisoned on charges of treason. Having said that, there is something I can suggest. Visit your father-in-law as soon as possible and ask him to write a letter explaining the matter and address it to the Esteemed President of Turkey, İsmet İnönü. Bring that letter to me. I’ll add a cover letter and make sure it reaches President İnönü. It might be better to try and solve this from Turkey, not here.”

“And what if your president refuses?”

“Madame Blum, I didn’t say the Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs or the Turkish Prime Minister. I said the President himself. I know him personally which is why I’ll be writing the cover letter.”
The next day, having visited her father-in-law in his jail cell in Bourassol where he had been languishing for two years, Mrs. Blum returned to the Turkish Embassy with a letter which had been scribbled in pencil and signed by the former Prime Minister of France, Leon Blum. This one page note, addressed to Turkish President İsmet İnönü, requested assistance in saving his son and his son’s compatriots who were held in Camp Oflag Xc.

As promised, Erkin transmitted that letter to Ankara on the same day and not long thereafter a letter was received from the Turkish President. President İnönü stated that he had met with Von Papen, the German Ambassador whereupon Leon Blum’s son and his cohorts were released from isolation and were being treated as ordinary prisoners of war. Blum senior was apprised of the developments via French General Watteau.

Shortly before Léon Blum was transferred to Buchenwald concentration camp in Germany in February of 1943, Renée returned to the Turkish Embassy to personally thank Behiç Erkin and give him a pencil written letter from the former French Prime Minister. At first glance it appeared that Blum was expressing his gratitude to President İnönü for saving the life of his son, but he knew that the mastermind behind the operation was Behiç Erkin. Therefore, the letter was addressed to the Ambassador and sent to the Turkish Embassy.

Bourassol, 22 February
Mr. Ambassador,

I ask you to accept my most cordial thanks for the care you took in seeing to it that I learned the good news from President İnönü. But I ask you as well --- permit me to say to you, I beg of you especially --- to transmit to President İsmet İnönü the expression of my profound gratitude. I owe him the most comfort and relief that can be offered me in the present conditions of my personal life. What adds further to my satisfaction is that his friendly intervention did not only benefit my son, but also all his fellow camp prisoners with whom he will from now on share his fate.

Please accept, I ask of you, Mr. Ambassador, the assurance of my respectful and warm appreciation.

“The Prison at Bourassol … became a command post in the battle against the government of the time.” Through visitors such Renée … and others, Blum was able to communicate his ideas of the clandestine Socialist organization in both zones [occupied and Vichy France] on its relation to the resistance movement.”

Renée served as a member of la SFIO’s Executive Committee from 1944 to 1948. After the war, both Robert and Renée collected and helped in publishing many of Leon’s writings including his poetry. Robert Blum died in Paris on December 23rd 1975, and may well be buried, along his father in Jouy en Josas near Paris. Renée lived in Paris where she died on February 22nd 1999.
A letter of thanks to Turkish Ambassador Behiç Erkin from former French Prime Minister Léon Blum

Léon Blum returning from a German concentration camp in May 1945. Greeting him on his left is his daughter-in-law Renée and granddaughter Catherine

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i This article is based on Reisman Arnold *Ambassador and a Mensch: The story of a Turkish Diplomat in Vichy France* (Charleston, SC: CreateSpace Publishing. 2010) Also see http://www.nullisecundus-survivorliteratureandlectureservices.com/


iii The SFIO (Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière) founded in 1905, was the French Section of the Workers' International. It was replaced by the French Socialist political party in 1969.
Renée Blum: A Woman of Valor


viii First ministry (4 June 1936 - 22 June 1937); Second ministry (13 March - 10 April 1938); Third ministry (16 December 1946 - 22 January 1947)
ix http://bibli.polytechnique.fr/F/YA5NGAK ... c=find-b-0
x Joel G Colton, *Léon Blum, humanist in politics* p 431
xi http://maitreron-ligne.univ-paris1.fr/spip.php?page=demande_autorise&id_article=16966&id_mot=#form1

xiv The original letter of thanks that Blum sent to Erkin is archived in the İnkilap Tarih Müzesi Republican History Museum, Ankara University, file 12 of the “Personal Red Files of Behiç Erkin”