

Interview with Joseph Weismann, Le Maine Libre, 17 July 2021

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Title: “Never give up”

Subtitle: Joseph Weismann, 79 years after the roundup of French Jews, delivers this message at a time of crisis

It is now 11:45 on this Friday, 16<sup>th</sup> June. Seventy-nine years ago, at almost exactly this time, the destiny of little Joseph Weismann, 11 years old, and his family, became intertwined with the most tragic events imaginable. “They came to arrest us at noon”, recalls Jo Weismann with emotion during our interview at his house in Le Mans. The roundup of Vel d’Hiv<sup>1</sup> was to deliver all into horror, with no pity of distinction: the old, the not-so-old, the men, the women, the children.

Tomorrow, on the Aristide-Briand Square in Le Mans, this terrible episode in our history will be remembered. And like every year, Jo Weismann, who survived the Holocaust thanks to his escape from the Beaune-la-Rolande internment camp<sup>2</sup>, will give his testimony—so that we do not forget, and also to honour the members of his family who never returned from the death camp. In the middle of the current health crisis, his message to is: “let us remain optimistic, and let us keep things in perspective.”

*The interview follows.*

**Le Maine Libre: Before you speak to us at the ceremony on Sunday, you have a message for us...**

**Joseph Weismann:** Yes. I am conscious of the fact that the people, and especially the young, are going through a difficult period. My 22 year-old grandson hates not being able to go out and have fun as he would like. That cannot be denied. I want to say to those young people that I understand their confusion, their worries, and their wish to have a normal life. But it is also important that they know that our country has been through trials and tribulations in the past and has always overcome them. We must not give up. And we must keep things in perspective.

**Question: So you appeal to optimism?**

**Answer:** France has lived through much worse crises and has always overcome them. Humanity has always fought against trials of all kinds. I am horrified by what is happening in Syria, the deaths, the refugees and migrants. How is it possible for us to enjoy a good meal and a restful night’s sleep when one sees such horrors on TV? Here, the young people are unhappy because they cannot go dancing. In Syria, they have nothing to eat. Their youth and their lives have been stolen from them. So, in France, we must not succumb to pessimism. I want to say: do not listen to the dark crows; the sun is still shining.

**Question: You have been giving testimony in schools, high schools, universities for a long time. Recently, your appearances have become less frequent.**

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<sup>1</sup> Vel d’Hiv (vélodrome), a cycling track in Paris where the Parisian Jews were held in the days immediately following the roundup.

<sup>2</sup> The camp from where the French Jews were deported to Auschwitz.

**Answer:** I am 90 years old. The flashbacks to the past, those recollections, are becoming increasingly painful. Hence, following the advice from the people around me, I have decided to spare myself somewhat. But I am very aware of the impact these testimonies have had, and therefore I will continue with them to the extent possible. Not least because there are fewer and fewer witnesses of those times left.

**Question: On Sunday, you will give a speech at the ceremony, as you do every year. Tell us a bit about your intense feelings during each of these commemorations.**

**Answer:** For me, to evoke those moments during my testimony is to re-live them. It is very testing, and it is becoming more difficult as I age. Ten years ago I could cope with it much better. Having said that, if a few weeks pass by without anybody asking me about the subject, I become restless. I have a need to exchange ideas with others, and to bear witness. It is vital for me. Each time I give, I also receive something in return. You know, my daughter has asked me to not speak on Sunday, to let my son read my speech. But I cannot do that. This would give me the feeling of having betrayed those whom I left behind when I escaped from Beaune-la-Rolande. I know that I will be very emotional on Sunday, as I am every year. I have no idea how it will pan out, but I must do it. Otherwise, I would feel like a coward.



*Photo caption: on Sunday, Joseph Weismann will give his testimony during the commemoration in Le Mans. This year, with the message: let us keep fighting during this difficult period.*