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The Vel D'Hiv Incident Example

The Vel d'Hiv incident was a dark time in history involving the arrest and round up of foreign Jews in Paris during the German occupation of France.

In May and June of 1942, head of the SS Sicherheitsdienst Reinhard Heyrich, forced labor employment organizer Fritz Sauckel and Jewish policy official Adolf Eichmann visited Paris. Later in June into July, the French administration was replaced by the collaborationist Vichy regime instituted by the Germans. This would serve to make their plans to deport the Jews easier as they could exploit France's policy: all Jews had to wear gold stars of David to make clear that they were Jews.

On July 16th, 1942, around 4,500 French policemen began to arrest all Jewish in Paris en masse as ordered by the German authorities. 13,000 Jews, around 4,000 of which were children, were rounded up and taken to the Velodrome d'Hiver in the span of one week. Inside the stadium, it was horribly crowded and the smell was noted to be horrible, the facility not built to hold so many people. There was very little water and food, as well as poor sanitation that only exacerbated the confusion and panic among the Jews. In the following week, the Jews were moved once more to the Pilthiviers concentration camp in Loiret and the Beaune-la-Rolande concentration camp

in Drancy. When they arrived there in the end of July and until the beginning of August, they were prepared to be transported to Auschwitz. Children as young as babies and as old as early adolescents were separated from their parents and were left behind until the end of the month, where they would be transported to their tragic deaths with complete strangers in September.

Two months after the Vel d'Hiv, approximately 1,000 Jews were deported to Auschwitz every two to three days and by the end of September, 38,000 had been deported to their ends. By 1945, only 780 of those 38,000 had survived.

The general public had mixed feelings about the incident, from actively working with the Germans (civil administration and police force) to arrest Jews to indifference and even empathy towards those being persecuted. Though they were a minority, there were those who tried to help the Jews by purposefully ignoring the escapees instead of turning them over and those who risked their own lives by hiding them from the authorities. Because the public had knowledge of women and children also being included in the round-up, groups like the church and press protested the authorities.

Two notable survivors from the incident are Sarah Lichtsztejn-Montard and Cecile Widerman-Kaufer. Lichtsztejn was 14 at the time but managed to escape with guidance from her mother, who intentionally lied to keep her daughter safe. Lichtsztejn recalled that on that Thursday morning, many people had still been asleep (it was 6 AM) but were woken up by police banging on their doors and forcing them out of their homes, giving them no information as to why or where they were being taken. They barely had time to collect even the minimum amount of belongings, much less their senses before they were carted off to the stadium. When Lichtsztejn arrived at the stadium, she had met up with some of her own classmates, who seemed unperturbed by the situation.

Widerman was 12 at the time and managed to survive because her mother had sent a note to her grandparents to let them know what was happening, who were able to contact a French Catholic woman who was already hiding five other Jewish children in her home. She recorded her entire experience everyday until the end

of the war in her diary, later publishing it into the book *Goodbye for Always: The Triumph of the Innocents*. At first, she didn't want to share her experience, believing the pain she felt was only hers to bear, but later changed her mind, finding importance in sharing her story so people would not only understand her pain, but learn from it as well.

While there are many like Wideman who believe and insist on learning from history, there are those who don't. French head of the National Front Marine Le Pen believes that France shouldn't be held accountable for the atrocities at all, remarking that the incident was the fault of the Germans and completely disregarding that the Vichy regime collaborated with the Germans on their own will. She also continues with a supporting statement, saying that she stands by her opinion because she believes that France has taught the younger generations to only criticize and feel shame for being French because of Vel d'Hiv. By deflecting responsibility, it's supposed to make youth proud of being French again. This is a stark difference in opinions compared to former French president Jacques Chirac and then leader, François Hollande, who have both apologized for France's participation. Current leader Emmanuel Macron referred to her comments as a serious mistake and French Jewish organizations have considered them insults to France.

Le Pen's belief is shared by others, but fortunately, it's not an opinion shared by the majority of the population. Despite this very real event with very real survivors, some will still try to play down the atrocities or just flat-out deny them. Whether this is because they cannot stand the harsh reality of the world or because they have a prejudice within themselves that warps their views, it is important that we look back on events such as these and learn from them. Erasing history or oversimplifying it can lead to inaccurate teachings of it to our future generations, preventing them from making informed conclusions about events and making it difficult for them to take away important lessons that they can apply in their own life. As people who live on this Earth, it is a hope that we are able to always look to history with a clear mind and clear eyes so we can make fair judgements that aren't clouded by bias brought on by misinformation.