

Madame Talent: A Remembrance

GILBERT BILEZIKIAN

To a young boy living in Paris during the German occupation, every day was a struggle for survival. Because of the scarcity of food, hunger had become a relentless torment. Almost daily, older people in our neighborhood were reported to have died of deprivation. The lack of fuel to heat homes and schools rendered lethal the exceptionally harsh winters of 1941 and 1942. Adults went about gaunt and listless. Children did not learn to play, to run, and to laugh. Tall strangers in green uniforms paraded around under the display of their twisted, satanic cross. Their heavy steel helmets, the daggers hanging from their wide black leather belts, their rough voices, and their hard faces struck terror into the depths of our beings. Pervasive fear, gnawing want, and hopelessness permeated every aspect of our existence.

Unexpectedly, a tiny ray of light broke through the surrounding darkness. My beleaguered widower father insisted that I attend the Sunday School, which was run by Chappelle Milton, a small Protestant church now defunct that was located just a few blocks away from our home. The church ritual seemed meaningless, but the children's hour transported me into a colorful world of peace and gentleness that illumined the grassy hills around an ancient lake. The hungry were fed, the sick and maimed were healed, children were loved, and storms were calmed. I was offered a Bible by the teacher of my class. Three-quarters of a century later, it lies open here on my desk as I write these words. I did read it avidly and discovered the man from God at the center of the story. He won my heart and soon became my secret friend.

Among the brave adults who taught us was an older woman called Madame Talent. She was the widow of a French soldier who had been killed in the trenches of Verdun during World War I. There really was nothing remarkable about her that could have justified her name. She was a plain-looking woman with a round face, short and slicked-down hair for simplicity. Hot or cold, indoors or outside, she always wore the same long, dark coat made of some shiny material held tightly together with a vertical row of tiny buttons in front; a black cloche hat that framed perfectly the shape of her face; thin boots, high on the ankles and secured by networks of stringy black laces. I was dimly aware that, in attire and lifestyle, she still belonged to the culture of the nineteenth century and to the remote southern province from which she had come to the capital to work as a housemaid.

Madame Talent lived modestly off the widows' pension of her deceased military husband. She received enough money to rent a "sixième," one of the disaffected one-room maid's sleeping quarters that had been attached, in more prosperous times, to the bourgeois apartments downstairs. Her little room had a skylight for a window from which I could see, while standing on the one chair in the place, the roofs and chimneys of Paris with the Eiffel Tower in the distance.

Madame Talent did not have children of her own, but she loved us, her Sunday School pupils, as if we were her own. At that

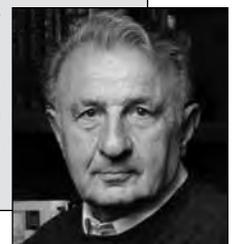
time, Thursdays were the mid-week off day for the elementary educational system. On those days, while other leaders were taking care of the girls, she gathered half a dozen of us, skinny street urchins, for a time of games, storytelling, and a much-awaited snack. Needless to say, we wreaked havoc chasing each other around in her tiny room, bouncing on her cot, and devouring anything edible. By some sort of miracle, she always came up with tartines, cookies, or some sort of sweet of her own invention. Where she found the resources for such sacrificial extravagance, I never knew.

In a time when hatred ruled and violence prevailed, I slowly perceived that I had a source of genuine love in Madame Talent. It took a while for me to understand it because everybody hated everybody. I could not figure out why she would like me. I thought that she might be feeling sorry for the devastation that the harrowing death of my mother had caused a few years earlier. Or, perhaps, she had discerned that I was genuinely grateful for her efforts to give us boys some joy. When she would talk to me, she would add the possessive pronoun to the nickname I was given in those days, one that was based on the first syllable of my last name. She would not call me "gros Bil" as others did, but "mon gros Bil." Without her treating me as a teacher's pet, I knew that a bond of mutual affection had formed between us.

Eventually, D-day brought deliverance from foreign tyranny. Studies resumed in earnest and university followed. With the passing of time, Madame Talent became a fading memory. After obtaining my credentials, I was teaching young people preparing for Christian service in a theological school called the European Bible Institute, located in the Paris environs. With every vacation time that came around, I organized a team of students to visit churches in one of the Protestant regions of France.

During one particular spring break, we were in the Cévennes, a mountainous area of central France that had served as a refuge for the Huguenots in their flight from monarchic persecution three centuries earlier. The church in the old city of Ganges had invited our team to hold evening meetings to encourage and strengthen the local congregation. On one particular night, the gathering was well attended, the students who led the worship sharp and enthusiastic, and the attendees responsive to both the musical part and to my teaching. At the close, the pastor invited me to greet the people at the door as they went out.

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While I shook hands and exchanged a few pleasant words with each person who passed by, I quickly looked aside to my right to prepare for those still coming up. Suddenly, a few persons down the line, I saw her. I recognized her immediately. Unmistakably, it was my friend, Madame Talent. She was still wearing the same old coat that time had turned to a greenish color. Her hair, her eyes, and her face had faded into a strange, uniformly gray tone. She stooped noticeably and seemed to be smaller. She took little steps next to the lady who led her. Soon, she was in front of me. With a thin, shaky voice, she said politely, “Bonsoir, Monsieur.” I answered, “Bonsoir, Madame Talent.”

I will never forget what happened at that moment. Startled, she lifted her head and came closer, her eyes searching my face. I could tell that she did not recognize me. Hesitantly, she muttered, “Mais, vous me connaissez?” (You know me?) I leaned forward, very close, and whispered, “Oui, c’est moi, votre gros Bil.” I could see on her face the effort of memory anxiously at work and, suddenly, a radiant explosion of astounded recognition. The next thing I knew, she was pressing herself tightly against my chest, and I felt her sobbing, just sobbing softly. All I could do was to whisper again and again, “Merci, merci, Madame Talent. Merci pour toujours.” (Thank you, forever).

As pastor Emile Figuière discretely escorted out the remaining churchgoers, I locked eyes with her and heard myself say, in essence, “Madame Talent, I will never forget what you did for me at the time of my greatest need. I was feeling alone in the

world and abandoned, and you came to my rescue. You did not have much, but you gave me all you had. You loved me when no one else did. You showed me that real love is meeting needs as a selfless servant does, like our cherished mutual Friend. I still remember you hugging me and me recoiling because I felt unworthy and unlovable. But you did not give up. I know now that you kept on loving that strange child because you had been yourself sustained by the special love that Jesus has for forlorn widows. You were willing to share his love with an orphan boy, also lost in a cruel world.”

By this time, our tears mingled. I felt her thin hands tremble on my shoulders. I saw her make an effort to speak, but she was too overwhelmed. So, I simply added something like this: “When we boys were misbehaving, you would exclaim that taking care of us was like throwing bread down the river. It was, Madame Talent. But, after many years, you are finding that bread again. From the bottom of my heart, I am grateful for all that you taught me and for having trustingly invested in me so much of yourself. I thank God for you.”

A few moments later, she was gone into the night. The next day, early in the morning, our team climbed into the school’s German-made minibus, and we were gone also, gone toward our next place of ministry, one of many more to come, enough to spread around the inexhaustible goodness of the love of God for a whole lifetime.

Merci, Madame Talent.



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