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Irène Laure

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was in the French Resistance during World War II. She wanted every German dead and their country 'wiped off the map of Europe'. But only a few years later German and French leaders said that she did more than any other individual to reconcile their countries after hundreds of years of enmity.

Irène Laure comes from Marseilles. The daughter of a businessman, she used to steal her father's socks to give them to poor workers. She became a nurse and married Victor, a seaman and pupil of the French Communist leader, Marcel Cachin. In World War II she was in the Resistance in Marseilles. After her son had been tortured by the Gestapo, her hatred reached the point where she wanted every German dead and their country 'wiped off the map of Europe.' At war's end, she was elected Member of Parliament and Secretary General of the Socialist Women of France. As such, she attended a conference in Switzerland aimed at restoring the unity of Europe. She was horrified to find Germans there and at once packed her bag. But before she could leave, someone asked her, 'How do you hope to rebuild Europe without the Germans?' She stayed on, for three nights of sleepless turmoil.

A voice inside her told her to let go of her blinding hate. 'I needed a miracle,' she says. 'I hardly believed in God, but he performed that miracle. I apologized to the Germans, not for my resistance fight, but for having desired their total destruction.'

She went to Germany, addressed ten of its eleven provincial parliaments, and spoke to hundreds of thousands in meetings and on the radio. Because of her prominent Germans went to France and apologized to the French people, on the radio and in the press, for what had happened during the war.

In the next years, several hundred leaders of the new Germany met with their French opposite numbers at Caux in Switzerland, and a tide of reconciliation was set in motion. The German Chancellor and the French Prime Minister said that Irene Laure did more than any other individual to reconcile their countries after hundreds of years of enmity.

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