

LA REVOLTE DES PROSTITUEES

Produced by Eurydice Aroney for RTBF (Brussels) and Radio France Culture.

Music

Maria de Lourdes

We were at our wits end. We were sick of going to jail, of being abused. Do you realize that the police would sometimes let their dogs loose on us?

Ulla

We will stay as long as it takes. You can see for yourselves that we are still full of energy. We feel bright and fresh and ready; we have scheduled shifts so we can all get some rest, and there will be no giving up. Even if we have to stay a month, we will be here.

Alexis Caraco

Was it not a bit unusual for you to be sleeping in a church surrounded by 150 prostitutes?

Father Louis Blanc

Of course, it had never happened to me before! I didn't used to spend my time occupying churches! That's why it played such a huge part in my life because it may have only lasted a week but I don't recall ever having any similar adventures.

Radio news announcer

The Church of St Nizier in Lyon is now famous throughout France. Over the last 24 hours 80 prostitutes have made themselves at home in this church, to protest the fines that are forced onto them and to protest the jail sentences given to some of the women.

Maria de Lourdes

It was really our last desperate attempt. That is how we ended up in the church, without knowing how it would end, without knowing if we would get out dead or alive.

Barbara

You are as you declared, the President of all French people. Therefore you are also the president of the prostitutes. Today we took refuge in a church in the center of Lyon to protect the women who were to be jailed by the police.

To the senior magistrate we ask you to cancel the charges against us. Otherwise the police will have to massacre us in the church. Not one of us will go to jail Mr. President. Signed "The women prostitutes of Lyon".

Sweeping noises

Eurydice Aroney and Barbara

La Revolte Des Prostituées.

Father Hughes Jeanson
These are the cleaning ladies.

Eurydice
Hello.

Church cleaners
Hello.

Father Hughes Jeanson
These people are from Australia. They are here to do a news story on what happened on the 2nd of June 1975.

Cleaning lady
Ah...was that to do with the prostitutes?

Father Hughes Jeanson
Did you know it was the 2nd of June '75?

Cleaning lady
No, but I knew it was in '75.

Father Hughes Jeanson
But you are not even from Lyon!

Cleaning Lady
No. Not at all. I was in Paris then.

Father Hughes Jeanson
Marion, what happened the 2nd of June '75?

Cleaning Lady
I don't know.

Eurydice Aroney
They don't remember?

Alexis Caraco
They don't know. Only one of them knows. And she is not from Lyon.

Eurydice Aroney
Would they be interested in knowing?

Alexis Caraco
She would like to know if you are interested in knowing what happened, or how it happened?

Cleaning Lady
I was not in Lyon, we only moved here in 1981.

Cleaning Lady

I know the leader was called Ulla. I think they were given sanctuary and stayed in the church?

Alexis Caraco

Yes - in the two aisles, but more than the two aisles because there were 150 of them. It was an amazing achievement and that is why the occupation is famous throughout the world. It was the first time in the world when women prostitutes got together like this and formed such a huge movement.

Cleaning Lady

Oh yes, yes I do remember. We had talked about it. They had come to take refuge in St Nizier. Yes, I remember now. I didn't know when it happened but I had heard about it. It's reminiscent of Mary Magdalene, in fact, so it is a very good example. Mary Magdalene was the favourite apostle of the Christ.

Cleaning Lady 1

How long did they stay for? How long?

Alexis

Ten days.

Cleaning Lady 1

In this Church?

Music

Father Louis Blanc (sings)

When we occupy the churches
You are scandalised
Religious bigots
You who threatened us with hell
We have come to eat at your table
At Saint Nizier.

Barbara

Monday 2nd of June. At 7 am the police are ready for action opposite the Church of Saint Bonaventure. On foot, in police and unmarked cars, in uniform and in civilian clothes – in short, no member of this club wants to miss the party. It's a chilly morning of June. They must have been freezing while waiting for us for two hours. But I can't say I feel sorry for them. In any case, us, we are not there - but at the Church of Saint Nizier.

Father Louis Blanc

There had been a meeting the previous Sunday night, before the Monday morning, and Ulla said she'd heard Saint Bonaventure may not be very safe and perhaps they should go instead to Saint Nizier. Therefore, in the morning, when all the sex workers started to arrive in great numbers - at least about 100 to begin with, they all

came to St Bonaventure. But we had a few people waiting for them there, including people from the Mouvement du Nid, who greeted them and said to them no, it's not here, it is at Saint Nizier.

Then the prostitutes went inside - the more faithful amongst them lit a candle for the success of the operation and then they left by the side doors.

I can still picture the police cars waiting outside the Church of Saint Bonaventure, with the officers inside, laughing, saying to each other: "We will get you all inside". But after the prostitutes entered the church they'd then leave by the side door, and each headed towards the Church of St Nizier.

Barbara

Plenty of curious onlookers have gathered in the square outside the church. The whole city is "in the know" and waiting to amuse itself again at our expense. They remember our street protest of August '73 that ended in mayhem and they are waiting for a similar fiasco.

Father Louis Blanc

The police officers looked as if they were having fun in their cars. But after a while, they were having less fun because ... "what is happening?" We have disappeared! In the meantime the prostitutes have entered the Church of St Nizier, where there are no police.

Barbara

By the time the police realize something fishy is going on there are sixty women in Saint Nizier; each one has slipped inside with the blessing of Father Béal and our advocate Father Louis Blanc. In fact, by the end of this first day of the strike there are over a hundred of us inside the church. For a bunch of silly whores who supposedly can't read or write we haven't done too badly.

Sounds of door being unlocked and opened

Maria de Lourdes

Here, this is the house of a prostitute who is taking care of other people's children. Where is Moustafa? Outside. But I told him not to leave the house! Where is my phone? I am going to get undressed and then dressed. I'll be two minutes. Where is my phone?

Let me explain to you, if you are doing a story. Here is my uncle, my father's brother. And this person is a third cousin. Her parents migrated and so there was nobody to look after her so we are taking care of her. So you get the picture from the start. This is the life of Maria. Now I am going to get changed out of this and I will be back.

Change of scene

My name is Maria de Lourdes. I was born in Portugal on 2 Feb 1953, in a small town called Serra da San Antonio. When I was 14 years old my parents married me off. From that marriage a little girl was born, who was deaf and dumb. At 16 I left my husband and went to meet my parents in France, who were already there with both my little sisters, Marie and Dolores. So I arrived here and at the time it was easy to find work. I worked as a domestic cleaner and was paid 400 francs a month. My mother took those 400 francs a month because my little girl had to be looked after.

Later, I made a few acquaintances, including a Portuguese woman whose friend worked as a prostitute. And that was it. In the midst of all that, that is how I started to work as a prostitute to earn more money and to be able to better look after my daughter.

But then things began to change. When I started sex work the hotels were open and so I started work at the hotel. I was 18. But then in 1975 the hotels closed down. That's how my prostitution began. In 1975 when the hotels shut down the battle began. We started the battle because we had to pay our rent and look after our children properly. We'd had a good life and then all of a sudden we had nothing; and we ended up on the streets and desperate.

Alexis Caraco

We found some archives of films, including a documentary that was made at the time by a feminist, an activist, and some archives too from the television. We found a few archives where we can see the inside of the church with all of the girls, and you were in sleeping bags, and we have interviews from inside the church with Ulla and Barbara.

Barbara's voice from video

Alexis Caraco

Do you recognize this person?

Maria de Lourdes

Yes, but she stopped working.

Alexis Caraco

So who is it?

Maria de Lourdes

I can't remember the names.

Alexis Caraco

Barbara.

Maria de Lourdes

Do you know why we can't remember names? It is because, when we work, we don't use our real names at work. I do. My name is Maria de Lourdes and at work I am Maria. But most of the girls didn't use their real names. For instance Ulla wasn't Ulla's real name and for the majority of girls that was the same.

Voice from video

Music

Alexis

Obviously this girl is smart. I heard that she studied at university?

Maria

Many girls had done studies - and then life turned sour. Even today many girls are

studying. You heard what is happening in Lyon, girls are working as sex workers to pay for their studies.

Barbara hums tune of song of Saint Nizier

Scraping sounds

Father Louis Blanc

What triggered the scandal was one person who I remember very well. She was sentenced to jail for the repeated offence of “working on the sidewalk”. That is what triggered it. Instead the others said “No, she will not go to jail.” The police were systematically fining the sex workers. Arrest, arrest, arrest. They were fined non-stop. “Jail us? Revolt.”

Barbara

I had to wait a short hour and then I was questioned for the first time. Name? First name? Working name? Age? Family situation? Address? How long have you been working as a prostitute? Why? For whom do you work? I did tell them my name and a working name - the first that came to mind - Barbara. That one stayed with me. But for the rest, my children, my address... that, I was keeping for myself. I was a whore now, a real one. I was “Barbara”. Like a professional prostitute I had taken a fake name of disguise. From now on I had two lives, the sidewalk and my personal life. “Barbara” the prostitute had to hide her real name. Neither the police, nor the other women, nor the clients were to know it. It was like that for three years.

Music

Maria de Lourdes

At the time they would hold us everyday for three hours at the police station. Everyday we did three hours at the police station, which meant that if you arrived to start work at 6 pm, and were held up until 8pm or 9 pm, then you could no longer work, your whole day was ruined. That was also what we were fighting against. We fought so that we would no longer be held up at the police station and no longer had to pay fines. And we fought for the hotels to be re-opened.

Music

Maria de Lourdes

The police would let the dogs loose on us. The dogs came onto us, because we didn't give in. And it was for our last attempt, really the last desperate attempt that we thought about the church. That is how we ended up in the church, without knowing how it would all end, without knowing if we would get out dead or alive. But it was really the last thing that we could do to try and save our skin.

I, like many others, was not obliged to work as a prostitute. But we decided to do it. Me, I always said.... I went to see the Mayor of Lyon, I went to see many people and I told them: “Nobody can decide for me, it's me! Nobody is obliging me, and I want to end like this. But I want to end with dignity. I don't want my children and grandchildren to say later: “My grand-mother was a prostitute, and she ended up a beggar. I want my children and grand-children to say: my mother was a prostitute, my grandmother was a prostitute, but she raised us like royalty””.

Father Louis Blanc sings

As much as you might invoke the Virgin
Burn all the candles
And yell about our sins!
For a few who despise us
Many others have understood us
At Saint Nizier.

Ulla voice from video

They lift their thumbs up and that's to let us know we have a fine. By the end of the evening they're showing us their whole hand up to tell us we have five fines. I think on average for all the women in Lyon it is two to three fines a day - obligatory. I think that is a lot.

Alexis Caraco

What is it like to see that footage again?

Maria de Lourdes

Watching this reminds me of how ...I was 18 at the time, and it gives me goose bumps. But also, it reminds me of how precarious our situation was in 1975, and how precarious it still is today. I think it's even worse today than in 1975. They talk about two or three fines a day. Sometimes it was more, for sure. Today they don't fine us for doing sex work, but they give us parking fines for the vans we work in and so it is exactly the same thing.

At the time, our main worry was that they would take our children away. Because, as she says, jail means they take our children away if we do not have any family. I had family here so when I went to jail, my mother would come and pay my fines and I would get out. But plenty of girls weren't that lucky, so they would end up in jail, and their children would end up in the care of the social services.

Music

Clock Ticks

Barbara sings

During centuries of silence
And intolerance
We had become used
To being treated like animals
We have held our heads high
At Saint Nizier.

Maria de Lourdes

Talking about the police gives me goose bumps because we had all been under pressure from the police. We gave them 500 Francs a week to leave us alone. But at the time, like today, there was corruption and often when the police do something it stays hidden. But what is certain is that we suffered a lot because of the police, and so to be able to work in relative peace we would even give them envelopes every week.

Lilian Mathieu

It was indeed a key moment in the history of the sex workers' fight, a significant moment, because it was the first real collective action to have such media impact and power. There had already been attempts at collective protests by sex workers, including in Lyon three years earlier when the police tried to shut down the "hotels de passe". The sex workers had tried to organise a protest but it failed because they were only a small group of sex workers who had dared to show themselves publicly in the street, to protest, but they were really too few of them and their protest came across as ridiculous. With the occupation of the church, where the sex workers occupying the building numbered more than a hundred, their claims were taken seriously. For the first time they were being listened to without being ridiculed.

And there was also a media butterfly effect whereby the media, not only in Lyon, but at a national level, and even internationally, were interested in the movement; it came across as improbable, a bit incongruous. And there was also the fact that the mobilisation operated like an oil spill: it started in Lyon because the Lyon sex workers had specific problems, but the sex workers of other cities identified with their cause and in turn began to occupy other churches.

Radio news announcer

8am. It's been nearly 36 hours since about 100 Lyon prostitutes occupied the Church of St Nizier with the support of its priest.

The trigger for all this is a wave of puritanical repression that has swamped Lyon over the last few weeks. The law tolerates prostitution, but to rid the streets of the girls - who are there because they closed the hotels down two years ago - the police inflict them with four or five fines a day. Consequently the girls risk jail terms because of their repeated offences. At the same time the tax office says the girls owe them a large tax debt. It's tolerance on the one hand, and repression on the other.

Listen to Ulla. She is the one leading the current movement - and for now it is going quite well.

Ulla

We will last as long as it takes. You can see for yourselves that we are still full of energy. We feel bright and fresh and ready; we have scheduled shifts so we can all get some rest, and there will be no giving up. Even if we have to stay a month, we will really hold out a month.

Barbara

"Letter to the People of Lyon".

Hunted by the police the prostitutes of Lyon have taken refuge in the Church of St Nizier! We are mothers talking to you. Women, who are trying to bring up their children in the best way possible and who are afraid every day that they'll lose them. Yes, we are prostitutes, but we haven't taken up prostitution because we are "depraved". Prostitution is the only means we have found to deal with the problems of life.

Society is used to condemning us and consigning us to a ghetto of contempt or pity. People regard us as "dirty" or "abnormal" women, but at the same time they say we are needed. Because we are needed! Prostitution is not forbidden under French law and theoretically we are citizens like everyone else. But because society is ashamed of

the fact that it needs us, it treats us as criminals, people who can be subjected to the full repressive might of the police.

Lilian Mathieu

And what helped increase the movement's strength was the fact that people rallied to show support for the sex workers. These people were in some cases public figures like Simone de Beauvoir, who was after all a figurehead of feminism at the time, as well as political organisations including the left and far left, feminist groups and social organisations who identified with the same causes or who simply recognised the legitimacy of the fight. Indeed there were circumstances that enabled this protest, circumstances that were specific to the world of prostitution.

And the fact that there were two personalities – not just Ulla, but also Barbara who had achieved her Baccalaureate [Bachelors degree], she had been a teacher and was already a bit politicised, and so it wasn't a coincidence that it was those with the most education who became the two leaders of the protest.

Barbara

We have hung on the front of the church a large banner, which reads "Our children do not want their mothers to go to jail." Two or three women guard the front door in shifts because visitor numbers are increasing. First journalists, then local community groups, feminists, non-violent groups. All want to show us their support, help us through our voluntary confinement.

Father Louis Blanc sings

During centuries of silence
And intolerance
We had become used
To being treated like animals
We have held our heads high
At Saint Nizier.

Radio Announcer

The representatives of the clergy have become the privileged ear of the protesters and the movement of the prostitutes, which began in Lyon, is building. After Marseilles and Montpellier its now the turn of Paris where about 200 "Ladies of the Night" have taken refuge in the Chapel of Saint Bernard.

Obviously there is a difference between the ordinary female factory worker from Carcassonne and the discreet prostitute worker on the Avenue Foch, and yet when we listen to one of them being interviewed by Jean-Jacques Moria, most mothers would be able to relate to what she says.

Reporter

What is your name?

Sylvie

Sylvie.

Reporter

How old are you?

Sylvie
30 years old.

Reporter
How old were you when you started?

Sylvie
27

Reporter
Before then, were you what we'd call a "slut?"

Sylvie
No (shocked laugh) - I was married. Everything was ok when I was married, but once I was on my own I struggled to survive. I had a daughter and bills to pay; it wasn't easy. A slut? No, not at all. The opposite, I think.

Reporter
Really?

Sylvie
No, no, I wasn't. I was with my husband for five years, and I waited for marriage, like a good girl.

Reporter
What was it like, the first time...?

Sylvie
...that I had a client?

Reporter
Yes.

Sylvie
First I was shaking. I had the shakes... I was scared; it's a weird feeling.

Reporter
Did you just go down into the street outside your place?

Sylvie
No, I went to a town where nobody knew me, because I didn't want to bump into anybody.

Reporter
When did it really become your job?

Sylvie
About six months later. I worked hard and saved, and I made it my profession. It's easy to get into the habit.

Reporter

But deep down you are still very much of the middle class?

Sylvie

Yes. I don't at all like people seeing what I do, outside of my work.

Reporter

Do you feel, in effect, like you are living on the margins of society?

Sylvie

Yes, yes a lot. That's why, when I am working as a "hustler" - as we say in a vulgar way - I do it, but once I've finished work, I do not want to think about anything at all, because it makes me feel.....

Alexis Caraco

You woke up in the morning in the church, what was it like?

Maria de Lourdes

In the church we didn't sleep all the time, we slept a bit, day or night, not particularly at night. We were used to working at night and sleeping during the day. And anyway we knew the police were outside and we didn't really feel like sleeping. And we had left our children outside. There were many mums with children out there, so we didn't have the heart to sleep. We were preoccupied with thinking about when we could leave, see our children and get back to work.

Barbara

Before even entering the church, we told the media we would call upon Madame Giroud, State Secretary for Women, to present our problems to her. We didn't have to wait long for an answer. On the Monday even before having been called, Madame Giroud refused to meet with us. "It is not my responsibility," she said. "But instead, that of the Minister of Interior." Could it be that Mr Poniowski has also become the Secretary of State for Women? Once more we are treated as delinquents and troublemakers, definitely not as women.

Radio news announcer

The prostitutes have called upon many ministers, and even, as you know, the President of the Republic, and at one point asked for the involvement of Françoise Giroud, State Secretary for Women. But according to Françoise Giroud, none of this concerns her. Rather it is the responsibility of the Minister of Interior.

Françoise Giroud

I think prostitutes should be considered like all human beings, and there is no reason to treat them any differently. Having said that, the prostitutes are fighting repression, and repression is the domain of the Minister of Interior, as I have already said.

Reporter

But it was no co-incidence that the women asked for your help?

Francoise Giroud

But when I told them there was nothing I could do for them and that it was not my business they asked for help elsewhere.

Maria de Lourdes

There were also the cameras. We were on TV everyday. People would come up to us in the church during the day and tell us what was being said about us on television, and that our movement was growing. So that made us even happier. And the more it grew, the more we would lie awake at night trying to work out what to do next. Because we were expecting that they would come and kick us out.

Sweeping noises

Radio news reporter

In the church precisely where 150 prostitutes are having their breakfast, made up of a hot coffee or a chocolate drink brought by people from the outside, the atmosphere is resolute. In contrast, outside, there is a protest in the courtyard out the front of the church.

Woman 1 in street:

How can a priest, a priest belonging to a parish like this one, lend the church to women who work in the street? I am not against these women, far from it - they are doing their job. But that they take refuge, that they come and protest against taxes - which they have to pay like everyone else, and that they occupy the church to stop the parishioners from entering! This morning there was a funeral and the body had to be moved to Saint Bonaventure. And the parents and friends who arrived were confronted with a closed door. And I can't even go in to pray.

Reporter

What do you think of it, Madame?

Woman 2 in street

I think it's stupid. I think it is abnormal, inappropriate.

Man 1 in street

I don't think it is inappropriate at all, I think it is sad. Not inappropriate.

Reporter

Why is it sad?

Man 1 in the street

It is sad that they have to come here so that they don't have to go to jail.

Man 2 in street

The girls have a problem, and it is not by putting them in jail that we will solve the problems.

Woman 3 in street

I think women like that are needed. We have to understand men. What about men who don't have a wife?

Woman 4 in the street

It's all married men who come!

Music

Barbara

We are speaking up, dear “so-called Christian” gentlemen, as is the right of any citizen, because we have been forced to. Because we need love, because we have children to raise as best we can. And we enter the churches like any Christian, not to glorify ourselves but to ask God to help us, to love us like he loved Mary Magdalene. We do not feel we are profaning anything.

Father Louis Blanc

What would we do on Sunday? Would we hold mass or not? Many people asked us. The women asked: “Will you give mass?” But after giving it much thought, we decided it could be really misinterpreted and would make matters worse. So we decided there would be no mass celebrated on Sunday. That's why. Some people were furious. You should see. I received a stream of letters from people insulting me. I didn't care. That's all. I was engaged in a cause, and couldn't care less what others said. Indeed, I received letters that were pretty offensive. But my hierarchy trusted me. That's all.

It is true we did get very involved, but in Lyon we had all agreed on the occupation of the church with the support of the religious hierarchy of Lyon.

Maria de Lourdes

Even though I am a Catholic, having done all my communions, praying was the last thing on my mind when we entered the church. We just wanted to save our skin and hoped that people would come and help us to end this battle. It's all we were thinking about. We were not thinking about praying. Far from it! The priest would come to us and would do the sign of the cross, but we only responded to make him happy because it was so kind of him to let us be in his church. But what we had in mind was getting out of this situation and winning the battle.

Alexis Caraco

What happened during the last few days of the occupation? Could you describe them to us?

Father Louis Blanc

There was much weariness. We were waiting of course for the government's response. The sex workers' pamphlets said: “We will only leave the church once you have given us the guarantee that you will stop throwing us in jail each time you think there is a repeat offense. Our children do not want their mothers to go to jail.”

Music

Barbara

Tuesday 10th of June. We have called upon so many people for help. Perhaps one of them will decide to act. Indeed, someone did react. At 5 am in the morning the

Minister of Interior orders a huge police intervention to clean out the churches.
Having begun within a context of oppression, this movement was to end in oppression.

Sweeping, music clarinet, ticking, bells, sirens

Radio news announcer

There is not a single prostitute left in any church in France. Under orders by the Minister of Interior Mr. Poniowski himself, evacuation operations took place at 5 am this morning. Everywhere that these ladies occupied, starting with the Chapel of the Tour Montparnasse in Paris.

If we are to believe the account of one of these prostitutes who occupied the Chapel, and met reporter Claudine Roi, the police officers were not very gallant, should we say, with the “Ladies of the Night.”

Sex worker

This morning, at 5 am, the police broke into the church. They didn’t give us any explanations; they arrived with batons and hit the women, then forced us to leave. Some women left without their identity papers, their bags and their clothes. They cannot go back to get them, the police are out the front and not letting anyone in.

Reporter

How many were you in the chapel?

Sex Worker

Oh at least 100. Some had left to get some rest, or at least a shower.

Reporter

Have you warned the priest in charge of the parish?

Sex worker

We called him immediately, and he said: “Wait a bit because if it is happening here, it will most likely be happening everywhere else in France too.” Which is indeed what happened. All the churches have been evacuated by the police.

Reporter

And what do you plan on doing now?

Sex Worker

.....

Music, dogs barking

Radio news announcer

In Lyon, the same scenario. The Church of St Nizier, where the movement actually began a little over a week ago, was evacuated at dawn. Our permanent special reporter in Lyon, Jean-Jacques Moria, explains to us what tricks the police used to “dislodge” Ulla and her friends.

Reporter

A little before 6 am this morning Father Beal received a phone call at his home. Someone wanted to talk to Ulla. The priest went down, crossed the street and knocked on the door of the church. The girls opened up to him and that's when police in plain clothes rushed over, the priest was pushed aside, the police went into the church and all that was left was to evacuate it.

The police officers told the girls they had ten minutes to get ready. By 6 am this morning there they were, outside the Church of St Nizier, carrying nothing but a bundle of clothes in their arms. But it wasn't this simple, because when the police officers entered the church, Ulla and Barbara, two of the leaders of this movement, were shoved around to the extent that they had to be taken to hospital.

The girls didn't have time to clean the church like they wanted to. Father Beal, the priest of St Nizier, is very shocked by what happened, but Michel Poniatowski has said that the police would - should public order be disturbed - be able to enter anywhere, including the universities and the churches, which have been places of asylum for centuries. So today it's done.

Radio news announcer

To evacuate the churches, Mr Poniatowski called upon a law of 1905, which allows anything that can "disturb normal religious practice in the churches" to be forbidden.

Mr Poniatowski (Minister for Interior)

I know that there was a wave of disorder. There were six churches being occupied creating public disorder, inside and outside the churches, and we also know that a number of other churches were to be occupied today including, probably, Notre Dame. This sort of public disorder is totally unacceptable. The churches are places of worship and not places of disorder.

Barbara and Father Louis Blanc: singing/humming together

By using their batons
Chirac's cops
Ponia(towski), Lecanuet
Thought they had won the battle
They have made a huge mistake
At Saint Nizier.

Nobody can shut us down
Anyway
We wanted to fight back
For the right to be who we are
Women, and not beasts of burden
At Saint Nizier

Father Blanc

It was the "national hymn",

Barbara

...wow.

Father Blanc

.....from the 2nd to the 10th of June, 1975.

Door opens, footsteps, bells

Father Louis Blanc

In the midst of it all was the Chief of the Police Force called Commissioner Laurent, who had a superb ring. In the fight it fell, I bent down, picked it up and put it in my pocket. I still keep it as a war trophy. Of course he doesn't know that. I am not sure what the Commissioner is up to these days, but given his age... well, he was a bit younger than me, but in the same range so maybe he has already gone. In any case it is still me who has this ring as a trophy that I keep just in case. Someone once told me it could be of use to me one day should I have to buy myself glasses. That way I could sell the ring and buy myself a separate lens for each eye!

Barbara

The police van drove us to the Moliere Police Station. A police officer said to me: "And you are not even crying?" Why would I have cried? We had won the most beautiful of all battles. We had forced people to become aware of our existence, and we had avoided jail. Even the police operation had served our cause. It allowed us to admire once more, the courage of the police officers who arrived as a pack of 120 armed men with about 20 dogs and tear gas, and all that to throw out about 100 sleeping women!

Music

Lilian Mathieu

The government was clumsy at different stages of the occupation. Both at the start, when it didn't take the protest seriously, and then at the end when it tried to silence it by using oppressive methods. The sex workers were successful, since the police stopped harassing them. The police officers that lead the arrests and were most likely to further oppress moved elsewhere and therefore the sex workers' situation on a daily basis became a lot more manageable. It became again quite peaceful and they were left in peace to go about their daily activities.

Maria de Lourdes

Looking back - it was worth it. It was worth it not necessarily for me - today I am old, but all the girls who came after us, they had a better life than we did. They were no longer arrested, they didn't have all those fines to pay and they no longer had to go to jail. So yes, our movement did achieve something even if it wasn't really what we had wanted, what we had been hoping for. But I think it was worth it anyway.

Lilian Mathieu

In terms of the first issue, that of procurement, the sex workers didn't win, or not immediately. They had to wait about 20 years, until the reform of the Penal Code of 1994 for procurement to be redefined in a less restrictive manner, so that they could have a peaceful family life without their children, or their partner, being immediately accused of pimping. So that took some time.

As for access to welfare rights, that failed, because the sex workers still don't have access to social welfare or retirement funds as sex workers. That was actually a big disappointment, and came about despite the fact that a magistrate, who had been appointed by the government to lead an inquiry into sex work had drafted some recommendations. But, as is often the case, the magistrate's report was forgotten – it was 'buried' as we say in French- as soon as it was submitted.

Alexis Caraco

Today, when we walk into the Church of St Nizier, there is absolutely nothing to mark the event. Do you think it is important for the church or the town of Lyon to do something? There could be a little poster for instance inside the church that explains that this event took place, it is after all a unique event. It is something that had never happened in the world before, prostitutes asking to be heard.

Maria de Lourdes

When you see all the protests that take place, yes, of course, this one is also important. But you know, prostitutes in the world are so downtrodden, I don't think recognition will ever happen. It is not even worth thinking about. We are so downtrodden and the whole world treats us as less than nothing, so asking for there to be something in the Church of St Nizier that recognises there had been a prostitutes' movement, that will never happen. Of course, it would be beautiful, for the women it would be great. But it won't happen. Don't even think about it.

I realised that when we did the protest the entire world was watching and I think they (other prostitutes) were able to make use of our protest in many countries. It makes me happy to know that in some countries the girls were better off after what we did. Here in our country that was not the case, but we will keep on fighting, maybe that day will come.

Music

Father Louis Blanc

Today there is a clergy, whom I wouldn't want to be too rude about because they are full of generosity despite everything, but still, they seem to be following a new trend. There are less priests, but those who do join the church are more conservative and more focused on the church, on things that are very ecclesiastic, compared to the active engagement that we used to have with society, with the world and for the world. Today the clergy is much more cautious and focused on the church itself. It's a new trend.

Barbara

It is impossible to put in words how much we owe Father Louis Blanc, who agreed to stay with us day and night in the church. He risked his reputation and the police insinuated that he was one of the pimps. And all that because he stood by us, and was committed to helping us prostitutes.

Sweeping, women laughing

Father Louis Blanc

So it is indeed the anniversary date, the 2nd June 1975. I was about to turn 50.... the years have gone by.

Alexis Caraco

So here we are in the church. Do you remember where you slept?

Father Louis Blanc

Oh for sure. It was a chapel that was reserved for St Joseph. There is one here isn't there? Oh yes, I see - it's over there. And Christian Delorme was with me.

Alexis Caraco

Was it not a bit unusual for you to be sleeping in a church...surrounded by 150 prostitutes?

Father Louis Blanc

Of course, it had never happened to me before! I didn't use to spend my time occupying churches! That's why it played such a huge part in my life because it may have only lasted a week but I don't recall ever having any similar adventures.

Alexis Caraco

There are many people who visit this church and that includes, no doubt, people who have heard about this event and who wonder why there is no record of the event in here.

Father Louis Blanc

No record? I have never been responsible for this space myself. I may have occupied it but I have no say in whether or not there is a record of the event.

Scrubbing noise

Eurydice Aroney

What are you doing?

Cleaning Lady

I am scrubbing the wax that has dripped from the candles. I think it's needed. Lately we have had many celebrations. I think this wax goes back to the vigil for Pascal. Multiple times during the year, depending on the ceremonies, we use the candles. So there is always a bit of wax, despite the little collar on the holder, that falls on the ground.

Sweeping Noise

Father Hughes Jeanson

I am Father Hughes Jeanson, priest at the Church of St Nizier. What I know of the protest and what I was told about it is not much. As an anecdote there was at one time a protest of prostitutes in Lyon in about 2008 or 2009 and rumours were that the prostitutes would have liked to return to St Nizier to reclaim the symbol of 1975. It didn't happen, but it was then that I heard more about it. We were wondering whether they would come or not and whether or not we should leave the church open.

Alexis Caraco

And what was your reaction? What did you decide to do?

Father Hughes Jeanson

Well in fact the protest was to take place on a Monday and on Monday the church is closed. So in fact there wasn't really a decision to be made since we realized it was a Monday. We decided to wait and see what would happen - whether or not they would come. But since we were not going to be there, there was not much we could do. And if they had come the next day, well in any case the church would have been open, so they could have come in.

Alexis Caraco

And had they come in, and settled in the church, how would you have reacted?

Father Hughes Jeanson

Honestly I don't know. I think that if a group had come, we would have welcomed them into the church. It seems normal to me. But then again, I can't really imagine them staying in the church because it is uncomfortable, it is cold and nobody can withstand it for very long. But had they wanted to hold an event, or to make a public statement or anything of such sort, it would have been possible.

Father Louis Blanc

I am walking now towards the Sacristy and I am going to pray for all of them, wherever they are. Ok, let's go!

Footsteps/walking stick

So you see, they slept here - lined up in these alcoves, or little chapels. It is in here that they made their home, their hotel. This was their bedroom. All these stalls were their bedrooms.

Church assistant

And the St Joseph chapel, where you slept?

Father Louis Blanc

It was on the other side.

There we are, I can see it. It was there that we stayed. See, the one over there?

Footsteps/walking stick

It was here, with Christian Delorme. Right here. This was our reserved spot (chuckles) it was here that we slept during those 8 days.

Church assistant

You know Father - this is no longer the St Joseph chapel. I don't know why, but it is now called the chapel of St Mary Magdalene.

Father Louis Blanc

Hah!!! But that is fantastic. Now, do you realise that if St Joseph has given his spot to St Mary Magdalene this is an incredible event..incredible!

Church assistant

St Joseph is still in the church, but in a different spot.

Father Louis Blanc

Sure - each and everyone can have a place. But for this to be the spot where they occupied the church it is very significant. You are looking for a place to commemorate the event... and this is just a suggestion, just an idea, but... why not here? It is after all Mary Magdalene to whom Jesus appeared.

Church Assistant

Indeed.

Father Louis Blanc

Well there you go!

Music

Barbara

My first steps on the sidewalks were in Lyon, June 1972. For three years I lived a divided life. The life of a woman and the life of a prostitute. And one day, in 1975, I realised by talking to others, it could no longer go on. We wanted to be seen only as human beings. And that was St Nizier.

END

Credits

La Revolte des Prostituées was produced by Eurydice Aroney and in the program you heard Alexis Caraco, Pere Louis Blanc, Maria de Lourdes, Lilian Mathieu – Director of Research at the CNRS (Center Max Weber, ENS of Lyon) and author of *Mobilisations de prostituées* (2001), and *La Condition Prostituée* (2007) and volunteers/cleaners at the St Nizier Church, Lyon.

Book extracts were from *La Partagée*, co-authors Barbara and Christine de Coninck (les Editions de Minuit 1977), Barbara was performed by Juliette Roudet.

Film documentary extracts were from *Les Prostituées de Lyon Parlent*, directed by Carole Roussopoulos (1975), audio archives from INA (the French National Audio-Visual Institute).

Original music score written and performed by Stuart Brown with clarinet - Elena Jeffries.

Production at Radio France Culture: Julie Beressi, sound engineers Pierre Devalet at RTBF and Alain Joubert at Radio France Culture.

Production assistance Alexis Caraco, Nicole Gooch, Albert Lecoanet, Tom Morton
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