

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE MAZEL

THE FARM HOUSE

For more than seven hundred years there's been a house here at the Mazel. Very little survives of this original building but if you take a walk down to the medieval village of Banne, you'll notice that the footpath is polished smooth by a thousand years of traffic. For most of this time the Mazel was nothing more than a farmhouse, where generations of farmers cultivated the staple crops of the Ardèche, chestnuts and olives.

To prevent soil erosion the farmers terraced the hills around the house and built endless miles of stone walls. I don't think we can imagine the effort that went into farming this land.

One thing's for certain - It was pretty harsh living here. Then came the mines.

THE MINES

Locals knew for ages that there was coal beneath the ground but it wasn't financially viable to remove it by horse and cart. That all changed in the in the 1830s with the advent of the steam train and entrepreneurs flocked to this region to open mines, one of them just a few hundred meters from the house. Le Mazel soon became the headquarters of a growing mining company. Imagine the scene in 1845: steam engines, whistles, and workers everywhere with blackened faces.

Suddenly there were buildings springing up everywhere - worker's accommodation, kitchens, wine caves, workshops and, most important of all, a new house for the Big Cheese – the director of the mines. Not content with a peasant farmhouse, the director wanted fashionable urban styling with classical details to show his sophistication.

THE SILKWORM FACTORY

Not only could the trains carry away coal, they could also carry other freight to distant markets including products for the new affluent middle class - such as silk. Silk seemed like easy money: get some silkworms, feed them mulberry branches, keep the little caterpillars warm until they spin a cocoon, then pop the cocoons into a vat of boiling water. Pull on the right strand of silk and the whole thing unwinds in one long, priceless thread.

But the story didn't unwind quite this way. Like modern day chicken farms or factory rearing, lots of little creatures in one place are vulnerable to sickness. Soon there was nationwide silkworm blight and they began to die off, taking the whole industry with it. The situation got so bad that the French government hired the famous scientist, Louis Pasteur, to research the cause. After 3 years of work in the south of France he found the agent, but by then it was too late.

FROM BAD TO WORSE

Meanwhile in the mines, things were, pardon the pun, going downhill fast. The traditional method of mining in this area was to dig shallow tunnels into which a man would descend with an axe and bucket. Improvements in mining technology rendered this method obsolete and expensive. In addition, there were union problems, increased health and safety regulations and consequently profits fell. One by one the mines began to close.

By this time the Mazel had ballooned to something like ten times its original size. But without an income to support it, it was doomed.

THE LONG SLEEP

Early in the 20th century the Mazel was purchased once again by farmers. Sadly, large cracks were soon found in structural walls caused by subsidence from nearby mines. The new owners were worried about the integrity of their building and they decided to sue the mining company for compensation claiming that the building was unsafe. A judge ruled in their favour, but with one stipulation: they could not receive compensation AND continue to live in the house. As a condition of settlement it was agreed that the house must remain vacant for fifty years. The family got their money, locked the doors, and put the Mazel to bed.

THE MOVIE STAR

In 1978 the ex-film star and art film director, Mai Zetterling, was going through a difficult divorce. She had lived for many years in France with her English husband David Hughes, but the couple was childless, he was having difficulty writing and they finally decided to split up. David returned to England to work as a novelist and to become a respected film, book and theatre critic. Mai looked for another place in the south of France, preferably a small house with lots of land...

When Mai arrived to view the Mazel it was nearly in ruins. The roof had collapsed in many parts of the house, windows were broken, shutters flapped in the wind, and trees had taken root in some of the tile floors. There was no bathroom, no running water and no electricity. It's said that Mai, a strong believer in fate, decided to buy the Mazel because the living room fireplace had MZ carved on the keystone (Actually it says MS, but who am I to kill a good story). Anyway, she bought the place and moved in with her handsome young lover, Glen. She was in her mid fifties, he, a tender 24. Together they were a good team - she had the connections, paid the bills and cooked gourmet meals. He did the building and doubled as lighting cameraman on some of her films. It was all very cozy... at least for a while.

Mai had learned one business lesson from her recent divorce: she kept the title of the house in her name. When things eventually fell apart, poor Glen got nothing for his ten years of work. When Mai shut down the joint bank account he really lost it. I'm told he got a gun and chased her around and... oh, never mind, I'll tell you more another time.

So Mai continued to live here on her own for a while. Imagine a woman in her sixties carrying logs and feeding the fires here in the dead of winter? Alone. Actually she wasn't completely alone, in the apartment next door Mai installed a "guardian" named Didier. Didier... how can i put it... never liked me very much (As an aside I remember the night before I signed the contracts to purchase the house. Didier: "You weel nevaair buy zees ouse. You are nahsing more zan an eepny mewzisian").

THE CURTAIN FALLS

May 10th 1981 Le Mazel - my home, a ramshackle castle perched on an iron rock. Here in my iron fortress I am above the fog which lies thick and blue down in the valley; it is whirling in spirals as in a Van Gogh painting. I know it is only vapour suspended in the air, as any dictionary will tell me, but for a dreamer it is something more. When the cold red sun peeps over the edge, the blur miraculously changes to a cyclamen pink. Bits of it decide to part from the main fog-bank and encircle the little hill in front, like an opaque Saturn ring. Magic mountains begin to appear, one after the other, in the whirling fog, which has now turned greyish, only then to become milk-like and still. The black silhouettes of the mountains seem like floating islands; the fog turns into sea foam.

Mai Zetterling - from *All Those Tomorrows*

Sadly in the early 1990s Mai was diagnosed with cancer and made a series of trips to Britain for treatment. On her last trip she left the Mazel expecting to return the following week, but she never made it back home. As the curtain on Mai's chapter fell there was still a shopping list in the kitchen, a half written letter in her office and a house full of memories.

Le Mazel was inherited by Mai's son from her first marriage, Louis Lemkow. Louis didn't want anything to do with this huge pile (or his mom's personal effects), so he put it on the market. Everywhere jobs were half finished, the roof was leaking and there was still only one bathroom.

A COMMERCIAL BREAK

I was in the middle of writing music for a commercial when I got the call. "I'm staying at the most amazing house," my friend said, "it used to be owned by a friend of my mother's. You'd love it. Why don't you come down?" "I'd really love to," I said, "but I'm right in the midst of a big ad campaign. Maybe next time. Look, I've really got to get back to work!"

Within one minute of my hanging up I had a call from the ad agency: "We're really sorry. The client's changed his mind on the whole campaign. The ad's cancelled. But there is a bit of good news... we're still going to pay you for the work. You're free! Why don't you take some time off?"

My fate was sealed.

It's now been almost six years since I bought the Mazel. It's changed a lot - some for the better and some for the worse. There's no longer Mai's pack of cheroots on the table and her fur coat on the chair. And I wonder: Will the new pool discourage guests from swimming in the river? Can't have that.

But this is not a museum. Houses evolve. And the truth is that you can't rebuild a place without changing the character. What you gain in comfort, perhaps you lose in romance and atmosphere.

I'm doing my best to keep the balance.

Kent Brainerd
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