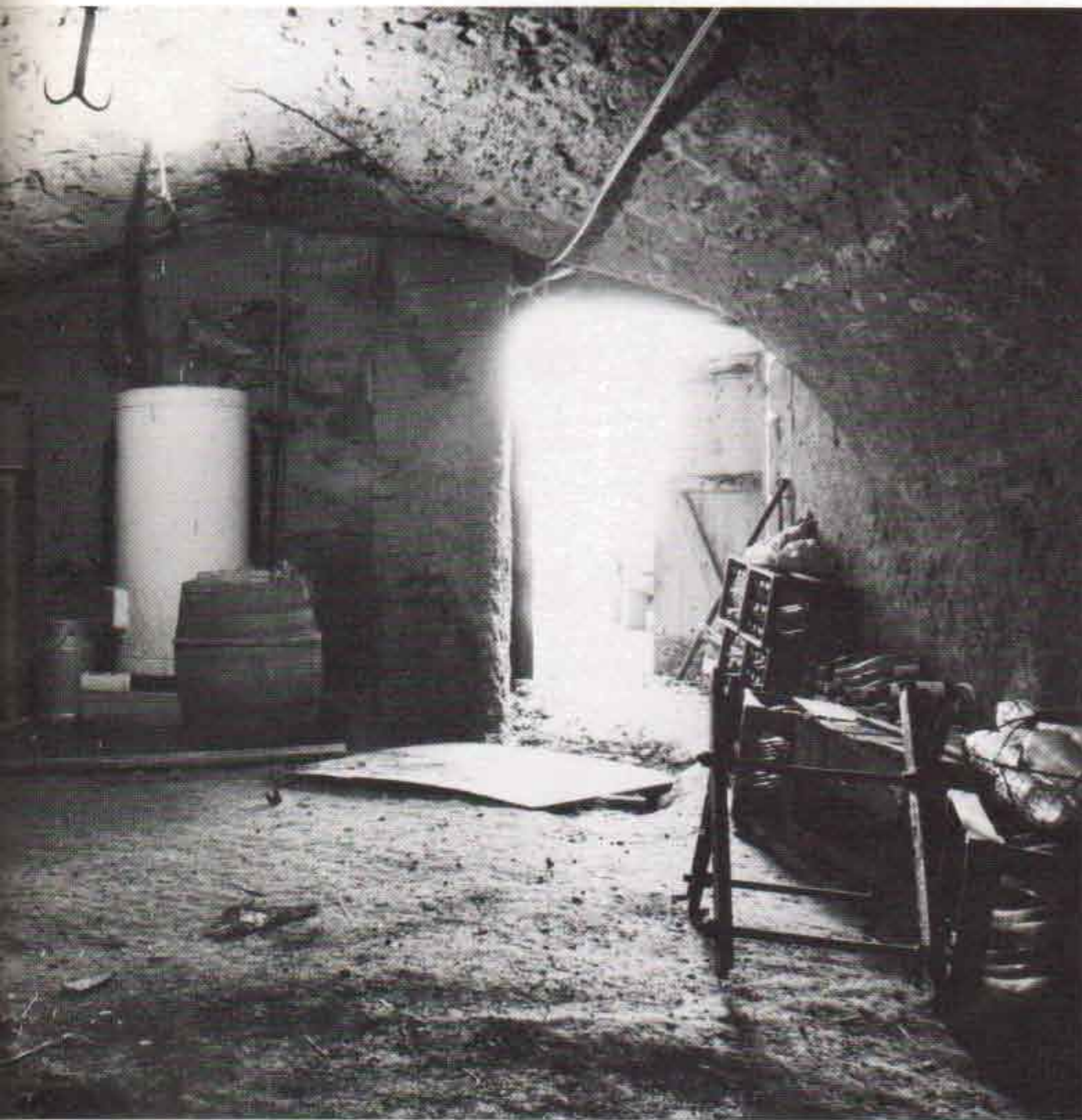




A good cellar contributes to the refinement and enrichment of a dweller's well-being, both physically and psychologically.

Le Rat de Cave – a Light in the Cellar



Photographs by Catherine Buchaudon

WHAT could be more insignificant than a cellar?

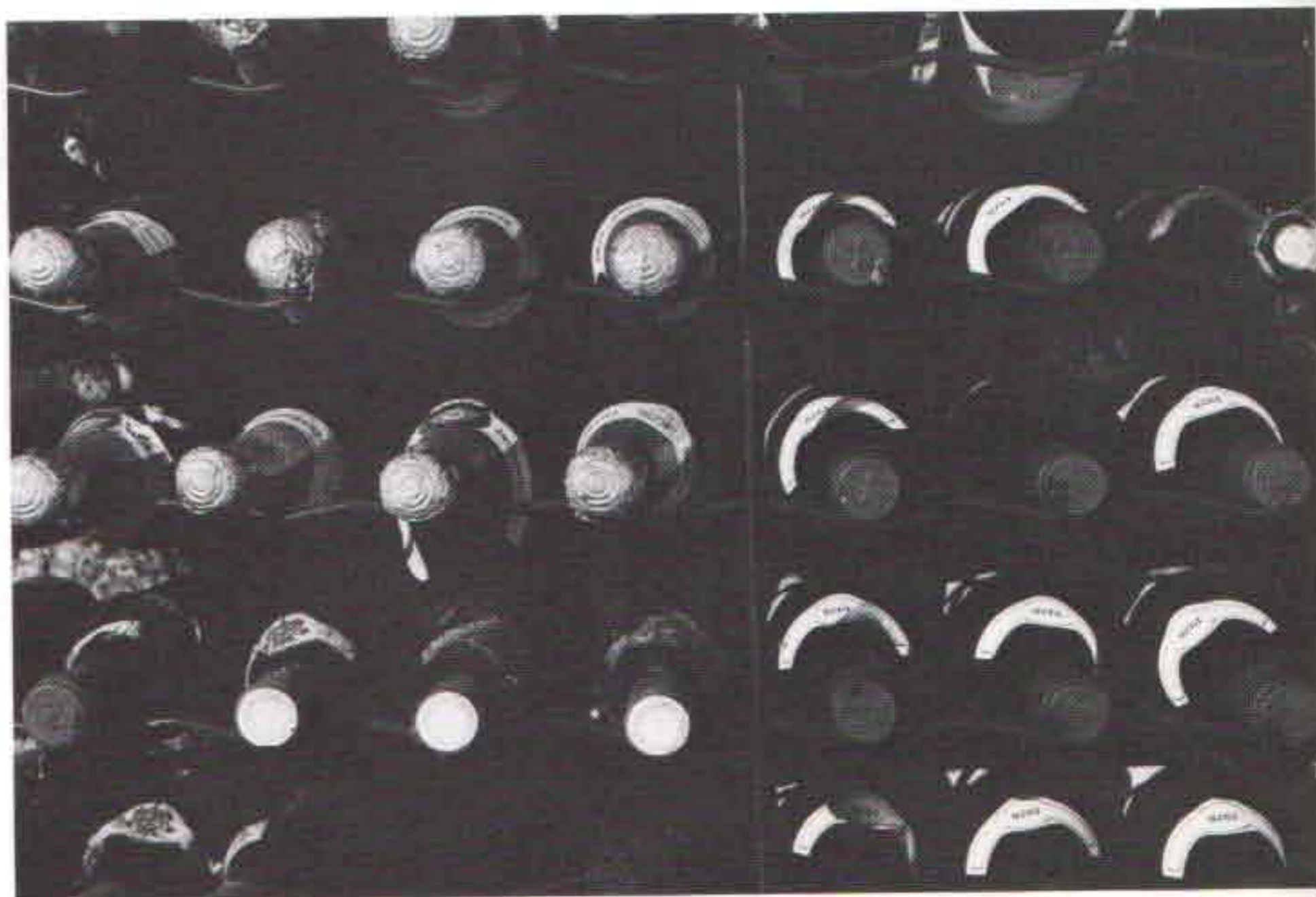
In France, most dwellings have one: farmhouses, suburban houses, mansions, and apartment buildings, new and old, simple and luxurious alike. Here and there a house is built without a cellar—where groundwater is just below the surface, where construction is done on a tight budget, or where a false basement is considered adequate—but this is unusual.

Why should we be interested in cellars? Aren't they simply ventilated areas that allow us to build a solid ground floor? Cellars do have distinctive characteristics—stable temperature, darkness, solidity—but we could consider cellars as simply another part of the house. Their use seems obvious: the furnace is here, as well as a supply of heating oil, or, in earlier times, coal.

In France, however, there are “good” cellars and “bad” cellars. They are evaluated by generally accepted criteria: a bad cellar is damp and badly ventilated, too shallow, or too small. If the cellar is made of concrete, it can be bad because it is not conducive to the harmonious aging of wine. The floor of a good cellar is ideally made of hard-packed earth. The cellar is vast and divided into a variety of spaces, all well ventilated and roomy. This enables the family to put down wines and to store fruit and



Food stored in the cellar is a reassuring symbol of a secure future.



The French demand cellars that allow their wine to age agreeably, so a good cellar is an ingredient of a good life.



The relics of past moments—old crates, broken toys, half-empty cans, unused furniture—lie stored in the cellar, just as they are stored in our memories.

vegetables gathered during the summer. In other words, a good cellar contributes to the refinement and enrichment of the dweller's well-being.

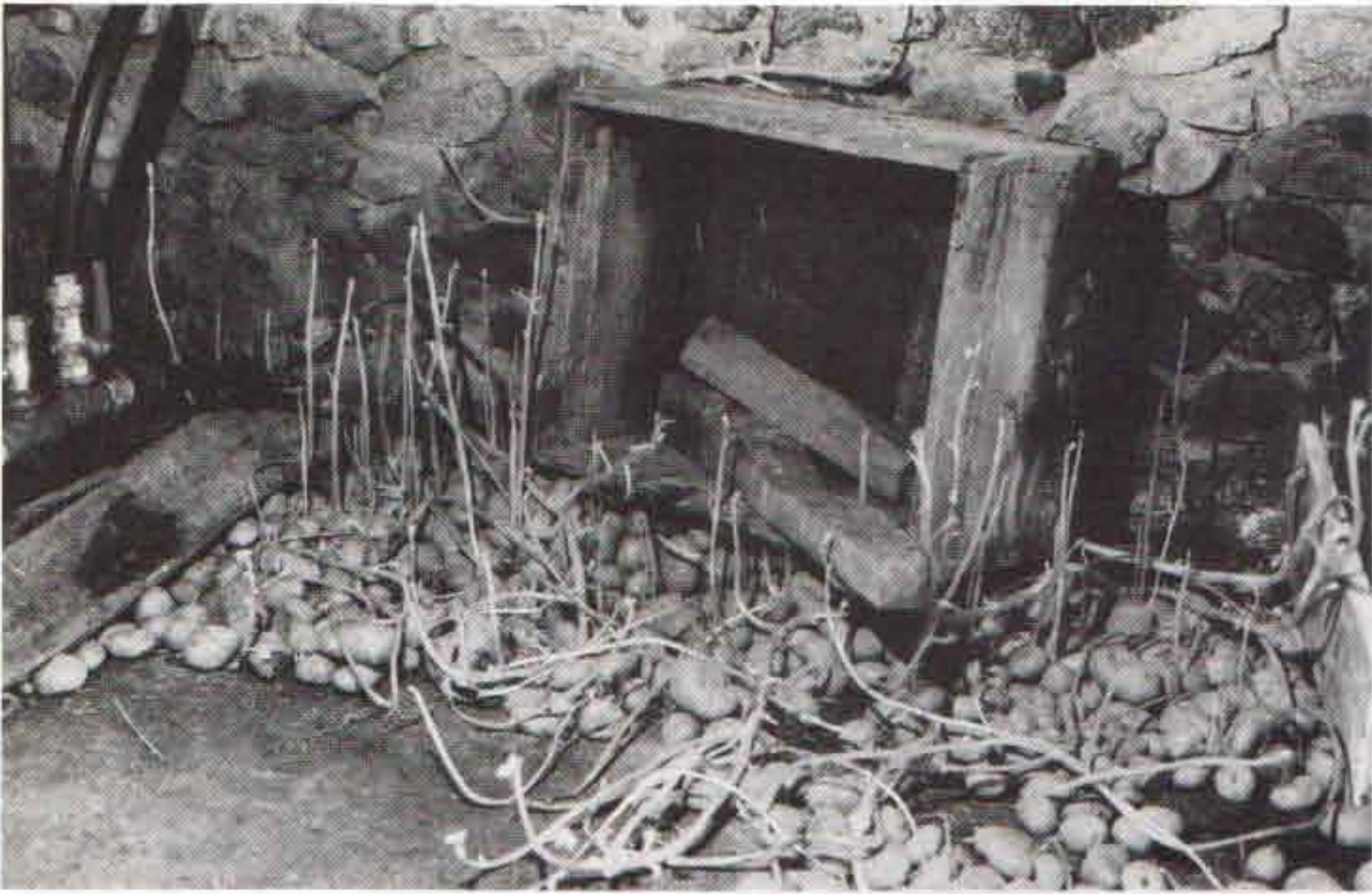
French people may also think of the cellar as a dungeon. The image gives us an uneasy feeling as we walk down the damp steps, hear the heavy doors closing, and grope through the sparse light from the cellar windows. In the past, and perhaps even today, children were punished by being sent into the darkness on the cellar steps.

We go down to the cellar with a *rat de cave*, a dim lamp that suddenly lights up forgotten remains of past moments and former lives: old cardboard boxes, crates, broken toys, old-fashioned bottles, odds and ends that must be thrown out someday, but still remain. Why do we keep all this? Here in the cellar both order and disorder are represented. The *rat de cave* illuminates our negligence, our need to get around to doing the housework in this dark and distant domain within our home.

The dust, spiderwebs, ever-increasing number of mice, and sprouting fruit and vegetables make the cellar a territory that is both immobile and teeming with life, a space temporarily left to itself by the dweller. The sedimentation of so-called useless objects reminds us of the past, but passing time is apparent in the proliferation of underground life at the heart of our home.

The lamp illuminates another world. Empty jars, kitchen utensils, sports equipment, and tools are all there, suggesting seasonal and intermittent activities. The cellar is a place of rest for these objects, and it gives us a respite from the worry of managing them. Everything that happens in the cellar is a reminder of time: forgetting and rediscovering objects, sorting and throwing away long-kept paraphernalia, the maturation and conservation of food and other goods, even the cyclic nature of using the cellar.

But fundamentally the cellar is a shelter. It has been used in wartime and peacetime to hide papers, deeds, valuables, money, and, up until today,



Life proliferates even in the most neglected portion of our house—the cellar. Here, plants, animals, and memories stir.

food. Useless and precious objects are juxtaposed in it. Food put aside and abundant wine reassure us of a future without famine.

The cellar is not open to everyone. Whether the cellar is an object of pride or embarrassment, it is the most private place in the house. There we accumulate objects hidden not only from the eyes of visitors but also from our own. We alone know of their existence. The cellar is a hidden territory to which only the dweller has access. Only the dweller can make an inventory of its contents. The knowledge of what is in the cellar is not usually shared, unlike the knowledge of belongings in the living room, the study, or even the bathroom. Our reticence is unconnected to any objective value of what we hide.

The fact remains that the contents of the cellar exist, and their existence is constantly confirmed and renewed by the dweller, who accumulates, stores, and sorts. The contents

are a secret, and the cellar enables us to work the secret. Hidden objects and places help us situate the boundaries of the self, and therefore this work is really the formation and constant reassertion of our identity. We need a private territory full of thought or possessions to be reassured of our mastery over our own identity. Our secret lies more in our awareness of this territory and free access to it than in the knowledge of its contents. This territory is the base from which our social identity and our openness to others is developed and declared.

What if we do not live in France or do not have a cellar? There are always garages and spare rooms that we make into junk rooms. There are boxes, corners, drawers, and cupboards. In other words, there are many hidden spaces. Without them we could not live in our houses or tolerate the visibility of our selves to the eyes of others. □

Rat de cave: the literal translation, "cellar rat," hardly describes the actual object. It is a portable lamp giving a feeble light, used when going down to the cellar. It was originally a wax taper, but this has been replaced by electricity and long wires.

FURTHER READING

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The text was translated from the French by Helen Dykens.

All photographs taken in 1983.