

**Returning to Exile? : The Retrieving and Rejecting of Jewishness in French
Shoah Narrative**

by

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Narrative

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This thesis explores the intertwining (and often competing) identities of Jew and Frenchman that play out across the landscape of Shoah (Holocaust) literature in France. The study seeks to tease out aspects of individual identity and to explore the nature of Jewishness in the context of trauma. This is achieved through a reading of survivor narratives written in French and (primarily) for a French audience.

Because the narratives studied are all first-hand accounts, the portrait that is analyzed is that which the author chooses to present to his audience (for better and worse). The texts which will inform this study are Charlotte Delbo's trilogy *Auschwitz et après*, David Rousset's *l'Univers concentrationnaire*, Paul Steinberg's *Chroniques d'ailleurs*, and Joseph Joffo's *Un sac de billes*. By reading a diverse group of French authors, both Jewish and non-Jewish, this project attempts to study the relationship between one's Jewishness and their environment, both hostile and welcoming, in order to develop a better understanding of an individual's concept of "self."

The last section will be an exploration of the continued impact of the Shoah on French Jewish identity and post-memory, as explored through Claude Lanzmann's film *SHOAH*. The readings of all of these texts will be grounded in a consideration of the unique historical factors that contributed to the formation of French Jewish identity (i.e. the French Revolution, the emancipation of French Jewry, the secularization of the state, etc.).

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0.0 PREFACE

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0.1 NOTE ON THE NATURE OF THE WORK

It should be noted from the outset that this work is primarily of a literary nature. A good reading of literature is, of course, grounded in history; but this document makes no claims as to the completeness or novelty of the historical research presented herein. The chapters on history are meant to serve as framework for the study, and as a primer for readers who may be less familiar with the relevant history of France and its Jewry. The selection and specific reading of historical factors has been done through the lens of literary analysis, and the specific texts chosen herein. The awareness of history that guided the reading of texts is admittedly self serving, and complete only to the best of my abilities. Other hands have composed more accurate and holistic presentations of the relevant history, and, when applicable, I point readers to their texts for a deeper understanding.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Changing our Past, Present, and Future: The *Shoah* as a pivotal event in Jewish History

By way of introduction, it is first necessary to make a note about the terminology used herein. The brutal systematized mass murder of over two thirds of European Jewry during the Second World War has come to be known in the English language as “the Holocaust.” The favored English term “Holocaust” derives from the ancient Greek *holokauston*, denoting “burnt whole,” and “a *sacrifice* consumed by fire” (Merriam Webster, emphasis mine). To use this terminology to refer to such a senseless atrocity would incorrectly imply some transcendental purpose for the baseless slaughter that took place, rationalizing something the world will never understand.

For obvious reasons this term is not truly an accurate description of the event, and has led many to search for more appropriate nomenclature. As Jews of the post-war world sought to make sense of their experience, they looked for a term that would encompass what they *felt*, and that would address the *impact* of the event being described. In truth, this difficulty in expression remains part of the difficulty of testimony which will be discussed at length later. In the end, only the languages of their forefathers, Hebrew and Yiddish, could provide a term that would adequately express the pain of their destruction. They chose the Hebrew word “*Shoah*,” meaning “catastrophe,” from a root denoting a rushing over, desolation, and utter destruction

(Strong's Hebrew Concordance, H7722). The word comes from Isaiah 10:3 where it refers to God's utter destruction of the evil in this world at the end of days.

Though "Holocaust" may connote the flames which consumed over two-thirds of European Jewry, it does not begin to convey the significance of the event. To speak of the annihilation of the Jews in terms of "The Catastrophe" (*HaShoah* in Hebrew) is to recall the great tragedies of Jewish history, and situates the destruction of the Jews of Europe during World War II within that history. As early as 1939 Jews were using the term to refer to the horrors they were living through, as shown in the 1939 Jerusalem pamphlet *Shoat Yehudei Polin*, (*The destruction of the Jews of Poland*). Published by the United Aid Committee for the Jews in Poland, it was the first publication to use the term "*Shoah*."

Up until this point, many Jews preferred the word "Churban," from the Hebrew term used to describe the destruction of the Temples in Jerusalem in 586 BCE and 70 CE. By the spring of 1942, however, *Shoah* had become the accepted term, as reflected by the published works of Israeli historian Ben Zion Dinur, where he used *Shoah* to refer exclusively to the extermination of Jews. Today, many Jewish historians do not include the other victims of the Nazis in their use of the term "Holocaust" or "*Shoah*," seeing the Jewish loss to be wholly separate from the gentile destructions.

The early accounts of survivor experiences which are produced in the years immediately following the events of World War II are marked by an uncertainty of discourse. The survivor is caught between two worlds; unsure of how to describe an experience that can scarcely be believed, let alone verbalized. Implicit in this struggle, for the Jew and non-Jew alike, is a difficulty in emphasis. To what extent is the experience a uniquely Jewish event? Should the individual or the group struggle be given greater prominence?

As the discourse evolves, so too does “The Jewish Question.” The choices in terminology, narrative form, and genre all contribute to the evolving discourse of identity. Early accounts are visibly struggling with the way to comprehend their experience in light of the changed world stage. Scholar Annette Wieviorka describes this in her text as their failure “to grasp the full measure of what had just happened on Polish soil: a genocide, the destruction of a people” (Wieviorka 149). She sees this as being attributable to an unawareness of a uniquely Jewish collective (or even the unwillingness to belong to said collective).

The “full measure” of which Wieviorka speaks: the loss of millions of souls, the devastation of the once vibrant communities, and the complete destruction of a people; all of these pains are felt in “*Shoah*.” The choice of a Hebrew word recalls the great losses of the past: the years of Exile, the destruction of the first and second Temples, and to their midst is added the slaughter of the innocent. By choosing to speak of the events of the thirties and forties as “the catastrophe,” Judaism and Jews begin to circumscribe the event linguistically. The *Shoah* is set apart; it is different.

The choice of a Hebrew word makes clear the significance of the Jewish element. Though others fell victim to the Nazis, the Jewish aspect is so great that only a distinctly Jewish language (Hebrew and/or Yiddish) can encompass it. As a result, many languages, such as French and German, have taken their cue from this sentiment, and have chosen to import *Shoah* as their preferred term for the destruction.

The naming of an event reflects or even determines the significance of the event. In a Jewish context, to speak of the *Shoah* in the same manner as the destruction of the Temple places the *Shoah* in a position of pivotal importance. The destruction of the Temple has ultimately shaped the Jewish religion and worldview, even into modern times. Even the most mundane

aspects of Jewish existence are peppered with symbolic representations of post-Temple exile¹, or in the Hebrew *Galut*. If the *Shoah* is *as* important, if not *more* important than the exile, it becomes clear that Jews think of the *Shoah* as one of the most formative events in all of Jewish history. To be a Jew today, no matter how observant or secular, is to be a product of the *Shoah*.

In fact, this is exactly what many scholars have concluded. Some, such as Leonard Fein, have actually gone as far as to suggest the post-*Shoah* Jewish mourning as the core of Jewishness itself. In “Mourning as meaning” Fein outlines a general Jewish narrative that fluctuates between cycles of acceptance and persecution. For a religious group that is defined by periods of mourning, the *Shoah* takes on a status of great significance. In answering the question “Who are the Jews,” Leonard Fein² believes some would answer: “The Jews are the people who, within living memory, lost a third of their number, the people who were hunted and hanged in this, the twentieth century, the people with the numbers tattooed on their forearms” (Fein 63).

For the modern Jew, the *Shoah* is the past, present and future. It is where he has been, where he stands today, and what he fears for the future. Leonard Fein best describes the place of the *Shoah* in our modern lives when he tells us that “To be a Jew in America, or anywhere, today is to carry with you the consciousness of limitless savagery. It is to carry that consciousness with you not as an abstraction, but as a reality; not, God help us all, only as memory, but also as possibility” (Fein 60). For some, the *Shoah* has become the reason to live as Jews, and for

¹ When Jews gather at the table for the evening meal on Shabbat (Sabbath) the bread (Challah) is dipped in salt to commemorate the salt that would accompany every offering made in the Temple. The Jewish male is required to pray three times a day, the times and names of each of these prayers correspond to the daily offerings in the temple (Shacharit, Maariv, and Mincha), etc. For more see David Golinkin’s *Jerusalem in Jewish law and custom: a preliminary typology*.

² Leonard Fein is a writer and teacher, who works primarily on questions of identity and society of the Jewish Community. He has, to date, written over 900 articles, and multiple books on the subject of Jewish identity. The article from which this section was excerpted, “Mourning as Meaning” is an attempt to contextualize the *Shoah* in the greater Jewish historical narrative.

others, it is a reminder of our place in an ever changing world, but for *all* it is an essential part of life. For Wieviorka, the *Shoah* actually becomes the very thing which allows the Jewish community to be collectivized in the first place, stating that the “hitherto uncircumscribable” Jewish community, after the *Shoah*, becomes “a community defined by fate” (Wieviorka 135).

The field of words in which we will be working is somewhat further complicated by the staggering uniqueness of the event. Words become even more important when we are dealing with something as indescribable as the *Shoah*. Many survivors feel that the event is impossible to describe using normal language, seeing the wholly new experience to be outside the realm of speech. To overcome this obstacle, new terminology is created, new genres, and completely new realms of discourse. David Rousset, French resistance fighter and camp survivor, coined the phrase “*l’univers concentrationnaire*” (The Concentrationary Universe). This became the title of his memoir, which he used to describe the unique *world* in which they found themselves. The lack of a vocabulary prompted him to create his own.

Some survivors, such as Charlotte Delbo, talk about the complete impossibility of describing something as horrific as the *Shoah*. For Delbo it is important not to describe the event, but to make her reader “see” the event, saying “Il faut donner à voir.” In order to achieve this “giving of sight,” Delbo utilizes a generic form that defies traditional categorization. The fluidity of her narrative crosses from prose, into prose poem, into monologue and drama, and others. Not only is Delbo searching for new terminology to describe her experience, but she is inventing completely new generic forms.

Lawrence Langer, in his introduction to the English translation of Delbo’s trilogy, talks of the genre that Delbo creates; the way in which her writing helps to come to terms with the *Shoah*. He notes that she:

“understood that before one could speak of the renewal of the human image after Auschwitz, one had to crystallize its disfigured form and the horror that had defaced it. She *invented a style* to freeze that horror, first in its original guise, then as it was prolonged in the memory of its victims” (XVI, emphasis mine).

Delbo created poetic forms that reflected not only the horror of the event, but the way that the *Shoah* would continue to impact every essence of the survivor and the world. We trace this same path through other survivor narratives, seeing the way that their *description* of the events depicts not only the reality of the situation, but their continued struggle to understand themselves in light of their experience. The novelty of the event and the identity crises it sparks are often reflected in the inventive language and forms they create.

This lengthy discourse on the choice of what to call the event may seem tangential, yet, in reality, our exploration starts and ends with these questions of expression. Language is one of the most important ways that humans encapsulate their world; it is the method through which they transmit their thoughts. To *tell* any story, one must first select the words that will convey their meaning clearly. In this choosing, Jews and non-Jews have made manifest the way they think of themselves and the events of their lives.

This, then, becomes our goal: to tease out the way that a person thinks about himself, through the narration of his experience. At the same time, an attempt will be made to view the group, *vis à vis* the experience of the individual, looking at a collective sample of narratives as a window to an entire community. The way a story is told reveals a great deal about the narrator. The evolution of a narrative speaks about the evolution of the writer. By viewing the narratives left by a collection of French survivors, we can gain insight (even if only marginally) into the complex system of identities that emerge from the experience of the *Shoah*, and, in particular, gain a deeper understanding of the evolving status of Jewishness in the French worldview.

Throughout this discussion, there have been repeated references to “The Jews,” “Modern Jews,” etc., which makes a complicated system of identities seem much simpler than they really are. In fact, simply to be a human being in the modern world is to live in a constant state of hyphenated identity. The focus of this work will be primarily the French Jewish community, looking at several particular periods before, during, and after the *Shoah*. Working in this historical context the evolution of French Jewish identity will be explored through critical readings of first person narratives, by Jews and non-Jews, allowing a glimpse into the complex and extensive impact of the *Shoah* on Jewish identity.

This is not to imply, however, that one single collective identity will emerge from the investigation. A multiplicity of identities is the only realistic explanation of the community. To discuss with any degree of certainty what it means to “be Jewish” is quite difficult, given the range of observance, connection, expression, and personality that go into each *individual* “Jew.” However, it is possible to speak about the construction of a slightly more unified group memory, the idea that each member of a group, real or imagined, is tapping into a collected source of stories, traditions, and ideas. This group memory, of course, is constructed in dialogue with the larger community in which the group finds itself; Jews are not the sole arbiters of Jewish identity. The input, reaction, and even the mere presence of non-Jews becomes an integral part of the construction of a Jewish collective memory. Our study, then, will include the views of non-Jewish canonical works to depict this exchange, and broaden our understanding of the construction of Jewish identity in the post-*Shoah* French society.

Every society has a group narrative, albeit a dynamic and fluid one, that unites and defines them as a people. Jews are no different. At the very core of Judaism is a collective inheritance of “memories” that links all Jews together. Whether he is Israeli or American,

Ashkenazi or *Sephardi*,³ there is something that transcends a Jew's individual history and ties him to his fellow Jew. French theorist Maurice Halbwachs would define this inherited connection as *la mémoire collective*, "an organic part of social life, a continuously forming body of knowledge that is being reshaped according to society's changing needs" (as quoted in Zerubavel 72).

For Jews, the *Shoah* takes on significance as both a historical reminder of the past, and a present reminder of the importance of group unity. "Collective memory"⁴ often constructs certain events as symbolic markers of historical transitions. Such 'turning points' can assume mythical dimensions emerging as paradigmatic representations of the group's past" (Zerubavel 73). The *Shoah* has done exactly this. It has become a modern paradigm for life in exile, persecution, and the long history of Jewish tragedy.

Judaism is filled with examples of these turning points, and many are described as whole group experiences. Jewish history tends to stress the position of the group, rather than that of the individual. The mystic tradition of *Kabbalah* teaches that the soul of every Jew, past and present, was *literally* at Mt. Sinai when God revealed the *Torah*. At the Passover *Seder* (the ritual meal and retelling of the story of the Jews Exodus from Egypt) the script tells the story of "What God did for *me*" not "our ancestors" making it *our* Exodus instead of some distant past merely acknowledged on occasion. Today, the *Shoah* has become yet another event of group

³ The world Jewish population is traditionally divided into two spheres *Ashkenazim* and *Sephardim*. The name of each group reflects their historical geographic origin. *Sepharad* is the Hebrew name for Spain, thus the *Sephardim* are Jews whose *origins* (not necessarily their homeland) was Spain. *Ashkenaz* is the Hebrew word for Germany, indicating that their origins lie in Germany. This distinction has existed since the first Babylonian exile, and has resulted in differences in dress, custom, tradition, and even legal interpretation.

⁴ For more on this notion, see Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, translated from the French by Lewis A. Coser. University of Chicago Press, 1992

identity formation. It forever changed the shape of the Jewish world and will forever influence our ideas of what it means to be Jewish.

2.0 THE JEW IN FRANCE

Beginnings and Endings in the New Europe

In order to fully comprehend the impact of the *Shoah* on the French Jewish population, we must first understand the events that came before. In this way, the progression of the Jewish historical narrative in France can be mapped. Several unique historical factors emerge which make France an interesting case study for Western Europe at large. An exploration of the longstanding emancipation of Jews in France, as well as the subsequent fluctuations between acceptance and rejection reveals a better view of the Jewish mindset on the eve of destruction. Seeing the way that France (both Jewish and non-Jewish) interacts with the Jewish question will help us to better understand the discourses that emerge after the *Shoah*, and the narratives that are constructed within this context.

Throughout history society has struggled with a label for the Jews. Attempts to define the special status of Jews often fluctuated between a faith group, a cultural body, a political body, and even a race. In truth it can be a blend of all of these which collectively fall under the heading of Nation. In *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?* Ernest Renan⁵ gives a definition which will

⁵ Ernest Renan, French writer and theorist, contributed a great deal to our modern understanding of "The Nation." His essay, "*Qu'est-ce qu'une nation*," from which this passage is excerpted, is a reworking of a lecture he gave at the in Paris at the Sorbonne in 1882.

inform our understanding of “the Jewish Nation,” membership within which is henceforth termed “Jewishness”:

« Une nation est une âme, un principe spirituel. Deux choses qui, à vrai dire, n'en font qu'une, constituent cette âme, ce principe spirituel. L'une est dans le passé, l'autre dans le présent. L'une est la possession en commun d'un riche legs de souvenirs ; l'autre est le consentement actuel, le désir de vivre ensemble, la volonté de continuer à faire valoir l'héritage qu'on a reçu indivis. »

A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form.⁶

The soul of which Renan speaks is the historical narrative, both real and imagined, which forms the collective memory of a people.

The Jews of France are united through history and experience. By either embracing or rejecting their “legacy of memories” they give consent to be a member of the group. Essentially, the extent to which a person taps into the national “soul” determines their membership. Later narrative analysis will be based on this question, on finding the level of connection with this collective soul. Though the legislative processes of France would define Jewishness in entirely different ways than Renan, Jewish identity, even today, continues to draw its substance from this collective soul, which in the case of France features unique historical elements.

It will be helpful to look at several key events that characterized the Jewish experience in modern France. Our exploration of the pre-war years can be divided into the early emancipation of Jews in 1791, the highly charged anti-Semitic publishing period of “*La France Juive*” and the rising anti-Semitism that was characterized by the Dreyfus Affair of the 1890’s. In order to

⁶ Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the French are mine. In instances where a published translation has been used (and/or altered) a note to this effect will appear in the citation.

provide a proper historical background for the narratives under analysis, we will then divide the war-time period (which, for the purpose of this study, begins with Hitler's coming to power in 1933) into the early years of Hitler's regime, and the occupation of France (the Vichy years). A thorough exploration of these historical factors will make the evolution of French Jewish identity much clearer, which will in turn help to clarify the narrative analysis later. Effectively, looking at the way that history has thought of and treated the Jew will help to explain the way he thinks about himself, and in turn, the way that contemporary narratives treat him.

The first major turning point which must be considered is, in fact, a major point for the entire nation of France and the world at large: the birth of the modern *République* as a result of the French Revolution in 1789. The formation of a "new" France ultimately resulted in the emancipation of her inhabitants, opening citizenship to any who subscribe to her ideals and obligations. The "nation" as previously defined by Renan comes to power at this point, bringing with it an entirely new world. The ideology of the new state logically necessitates the emancipation of all socio-economic groups, stemming from the desire to dissolve all corporate entities and homogenize the state.

Implicit in this is also the liberation of the Jew, which, with a vote of the French National Assembly, was afforded them in 1791. The debate surrounding the full emancipation of Jews (which took an additional two years to be implemented) centered on the issue of homogeneity. The assembly questioned the extent to which Jews could assimilate and fulfill the obligations of citizenship. It was concluded that "emancipation would at the least stimulate the *complete* social and cultural assimilation—or "amelioration"—of the Jews, and at best facilitate their conversion" (Hyman 4, emphasis mine).

The French Jewry was, in the words of Paula Hyman, “a child of the revolution” (Hyman 3), having developed a collective consciousness which was wholly centered on the Revolution. France became the *first* European nation to afford full rights to the 40,000 Jews within its borders, setting a model for the rest of the modern world. For the Jews of France, this was the turning point toward a new era of unprecedented freedoms. The establishment of the freedoms of the Revolution becomes an important “status quo” which will be tested and challenged for the remainder of Jewish history in France. It is this point which is essential to our inquiry. Every shift on the world political stage will be measured against the freedoms of the Revolution, and the result will immeasurably impact the construction of Jewish identity.

In the introductory portion of his work on *The French Revolution and the Jews; Assessing the Cultural Impact*, Jay Berkovitz concludes that “Their memories tended to be dominated by images of celebration and glory, comparing the Revolution to the Sinaitic revelation and referring to it in messianic-redemptive terms” (Berkovitz 25). This is explicitly seen in the “pervading sense of optimism among leaders of French Jewry, that credited the Revolution with having put an end to centuries of humiliation, legal discrimination, and exclusion from the mainstream of society” (Berkovitz 25). The Revolution marked the end of “*outcast*” status and the incorporation into the French whole. Incorporation, however, can also be seen as homogenization: Jews becoming Frenchmen with no Jewish attachment.

In order to further facilitate this goal, Napoleon I convened the Sanhedrin⁷, composed of Jewish leaders selected for their demonstrated allegiance to France. The composite members “declared their *absolute* loyalty to France and her law and *denied the validity* of the national, or

⁷ Jewish Religious court which historically has been designated to act on behalf of the Jewish community to facilitate the relationship of the governing body (in this case France) to the Exilic community (the Jews).

political, elements within Judaism” (Hyman 5). They settled on the implementation of a completely new attitude toward Judaism, which was to become the official stance of all Jews in France: “French Jews were to declare, with evident exaggeration, that their primary socio-psychological loyalty was to their fellow Frenchman, rather than to Jews in other lands” (Hyman 5).

Though the entirety of their Jewish identity was not obliterated, strict limits were imposed upon the expression of this identity. Jews were to see themselves as Frenchmen of a particular religious denomination. Any ideas of a collective, national aspiration, or cultural identity were diminished. Limiting Jewish expression to religious components consequently reduces the Jewishness of the non-religious. Non-observant Jews (born of either a Jewish mother or father) might continue to identify as Jewish, but did not partake of the religious aspects which so characterized Jewish expression. At the centennial celebration of the revolution in 1889, Rabbi Felix Meyer proclaimed “We have adopted the *customs* and *traditions* of a country which has so generously adopted us, and today, thanks to God, there are no longer any but Frenchmen in France” (Meyer in Mossé 175).⁸

Though the French Jewish community remained optimistic about their future, a shift in the attitudes of their non-Jewish neighbors was fast approaching. The latter half of the nineteenth century saw a rise in Jewish immigration, bringing with it an entirely new conception of Judaism. The newcomers were largely of German or eastern-European descent, such as the families of survivor-writers Paul Steinberg (German) and Joseph Joffo (Russian). Having lived an unassimilated (and often subjugated) existence in their countries of origin, they came to

⁸ For more on the socio-economic condition of Jews in the early years of the Republic, see the introduction to Paula Hyman’s *From Dreyfus to Vichy: The Remaking of French Jewry 1906-1939*, and Jean Jacques Becker and Annette Wiewiorka’s *les Juifs de France: de la Révolution françaises à nos jours*.

France with a completely different, uniquely cultural, historical, and social approach to Jewishness. The impetus to accept the primacy of a French identity was wholly lacking in this new wave of Jews, and their impact on the level of anti-Semitism was inevitable.

The influx of such foreigners brought about renewed interest in “the Jewish question” and caused many to rethink the viability of Jewish assimilation. Despite years of evidence to the contrary, some French Gentiles began to associate the “otherness” of the newcomers with the long assimilated French Jew. The result was a period of anti-Semitic publishing and activity, with writers such as Edouard Drumont and Jules Guérin at its head. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century Jewish immigration to France reached staggering totals, and, eventually, foreign Jews outnumbered native Jews two to one. The new public face of Judaism was unassimilated, unacculturated, and unwilling to bend to the superiority of French culture and polity.

In response, Edouard Drumont, and many others like him, began publishing anti-Semitic dailies, which deplored the decline of French culture at the hands of the Jew. Drumont’s most well known work *La France Juive*, published in 1886 was a hugely successful attack against the Jews of France, ultimately espousing their exclusion from society. He echoed this view in his daily newspaper, *La Libre Parole (The Free Word)*, which he began publishing in 1892.

The virulent anti-Semitism preached within France brought many to question the loyalties of Jews, and doubt the results of emancipation so many years before. Along with Jules Guérin, author of the anti-Semitic weekly *L’Antijuif (The Anti-Jew)*, Drumont founded the *Ligue Antisémite de France (the Anti-Semitic League of France)* which promoted, amongst other racist and intolerant views, the superiority of Gallic ancestry, the inferiority of Judaism and Jews, and the need to return the nation to French power.

One might think that these open actions alone would be enough to spur the Jewish community into action, yet French Jewry remained largely unconcerned with anti-Semitic activity. They chose to see anti-Semitism as a largely imported concept of German origin, which did not affect them. In truth, most French Jews saw little direct impact of the ardent anti-Semites, that is, until the explosion of the Dreyfus affair several years later. The confidence that Jews had felt in the country which gave them their freedom did not waver. The opinion of some was not enough to influence the entirety, and at least, anti-Semitism was not an official policy of the State.

Despite the lack of state support, however, the pervading public image of “Jew” become increasingly equated with “foreigner.” The influx of Jews was in turn blamed upon the native Jews of France, as the corrupters of French values, and exploitive capitalists. The image of Jew portrayed in the arts and media was also increasingly negative, slowly chipping away at the “Frenchmen” Rabbi Meyer believed the Jews had become. The seeds of discord were so deeply sown that it was only a matter of time before they erupted into action. This event would come in the form of the Dreyfus Affair.

Born in the northern region of Alsace-Lorraine, Alfred Dreyfus and his family moved to Paris at the age of twelve, after the German annexation of Alsace in 1871. Attending the prestigious École Polytechnique, and the École Supérieure de Guerre, Dreyfus was well placed to rise to prominence in the French Military, in which he served after graduating. Eventually rising to the rank of Captain, he was offered a training position in the Army’s General Staff in 1894. This move was the beginning of a scandal that would divide the country for years to come.

Without warning, just after beginning his training, Dreyfus was arrested, and charged with passing military secrets to the Germans. His status as an Alsatian Jew, who regularly visited his family in his birthplace, now part of Germany, made him an ideal target of the investigation. He was summarily tried, found guilty, and sentenced to solitary confinement on Devil's Island (a small island off French Guiana).

The trial was at the center of every discussion, and sent shockwaves through the community. The entire country seemed to be divided between *Dreyfusards* (supporters of his innocence) and *Anti-Dreyfusards*. The most prominent *Anti-Dreyfusard*, to the surprise of no one, was Edouard Drumont, whose papers continued to rail against "the Jews," believing to have proof at last of their treachery. A similarly unsurprising fact is the lack of action from the Jewish community. Though they were undoubtedly appalled by mistreatment of a Frenchman, they chose to direct their efforts towards faith in the ability of the French political system to fix the problem. The most vocal *Dreyfusards*, such as Emile Zola, were not Jewish, yet risked more than their reputations to defend him⁹.

This brings to light the second overarching characteristic of nineteenth and twentieth century French Jews. They were highly reluctant to interact in a way that might be perceived as "too Jewish." In order to affirm their loyalty to the French system, they abstained from public action in favor of Jewish causes. Rather than refute the decaying public opinion of Jews, they chose to stand on the sidelines and wait for things to cool down. Even the weak attempt by Chief

⁹ Author of the inflammatory essay *J'accuse (I Accuse)* Zola was one of the first voices to draw attention to the serious failures of the Dreyfus trial. An ardent advocate of Dreyfus' innocence, he exposed the miscarriage of justice in 1898, resulting in his own trial for libel. By inciting the rage of the French government, he insured that every detail of his criticism would be aired publicly, ultimately bringing about the retrial of Dreyfus in 1899, and his subsequent pardoning.

Rabbi Kahn, to quietly organize a pro-Jewish opposition, failed due to lack of support amongst Jews.

Though tensions had been mounting for some time, the Dreyfus affair was the first widespread explosion of anti-Semitic activity. The claim has already been made that anti-Semitism encourages a renewed self-reflective philo-Semitism, or at the very least, encourages identification with Jewish themes and history. Support for this assertion comes in the aftermath of the Dreyfus affair, a period of Jewish revival as the *direct* result of persecution. The aftereffects of the Dreyfus affair made manifest a “renaissance” attitude in Jewish intellectual communities, intent on restoring the traditional study of Jewish thought. As Hyman tells us, “The anti-Semitism unleashed by the Dreyfus Affair...compelled a number of Jewish intellectuals...to explore the meaning of their differentness in French society” (Hyman 43). Thus, already in the early Twentieth Century, Jews are responding positively to persecution. Anti-Semitism creates a bond between the long forgotten past, and their troubled present. The Jewish newspaper *Univers Israélite* reported that:

“This new affirmation of Jewish personality, this sort of resurrection of French and universal Judaism is signaled notably in Paris by a variety of efforts, of organizations, of institutions touching upon all the branches of human activity: creation of study groups, circles of artisans, societies to stimulate Jewish literature, committees for religious publications and observance of the Sabbath..., in short, a series of measures appropriate to invigorating our anemic cult”.¹⁰

It should be noted, however, that this revival was still *largely* an academic one. The majority of French Jews still continued to live a happily assimilated existence, seeing the

¹⁰ Mathieu Wolff, “Le Réveil juif et la province,” *UI*, July 4, 1913, pp. 130-31. As cited and translated by Hyman, 43

Dreyfus affair as the result of a few overly zealous people; a brief wave in an otherwise calm lifestyle.

Rather than seek to further Jewish isolation, the work of Jewish intellectuals to promote Jewish culture was principally geared towards the *universality* of Jewish culture; the idea that Jews are the direct heirs of fundamental western values.¹¹ On the eve of World War I, then, the desired public face of Jews in France was one of dedication, and contribution. Their own self assurance of their position in French society was only to be bolstered by the Jewish participation in the war effort, and the integration of Patriotism in their conception of Jewishness.

Even foreign-born Jews immigrating to France felt the need to embrace patriotism as a part of their religious identity. The Fédération des Sociétés Juives de France, a collection of Jewish organizations of foreign origin working in France, issued a proclamation on August 3, 1914 stating “if we are not yet French by law, we are in heart and soul, and our most sacred duty is to put ourselves immediately at the disposition of this great and noble nation in order to participate in its defense.”¹² This call to action was heeded by many foreign Jews motivating no less than a quarter of the Jewish immigrant population to enlist in the French armed forces (Girard 349).¹³

This brings us to our third characteristic of French Jewry (both immigrant and native). The Jews of France were devoted deeply to the cause of *la patrie*, and used their patriotism as an assertion of their French identity. The longstanding dedication to the country of their

¹¹ See Hyman, 42-49, for more on the actions of the Jewish intellectual circles.

¹² As cited and translated by Susan Zuccotti in *The Holocaust, the French, and the Jews* (New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 1993) 18.

¹³ Roughly 10,000 of the 40,000 immigrant Jews enlisted in the years following 1914. Overall, the Jewish population of France was approximately 120,000. In total, about 46,000 Jews enlisted, meaning 38.3% of France’s Jews served in WWI. All statistics are taken from Patrick Girard’s *Pour le meilleur et pour le pire: Vingt siècles d’histoire juive en France* (Paris : Bibliophane, 1986).

emancipation caused love of homeland to be an integral part of self definition. So long as they could be proud of France, they could be French. This factor becomes increasingly significant in later years, particularly during the Vichy period when the lines between official state policies and Nazi ideology become blurred. If the state is fundamentally anti-Semitic, Jewish patriotism cannot continue, thus robbing the Jew of a significant part of his *French* identity.

During the years following the First World War the assertions of Jewish patriotism and national service sufficed to quell anti-Semitism. The relationship between Jewish and non-Jewish Frenchmen was amicable, respectful, and accepting. The prosperity of the 1920s discouraged the anti-Semitism that was prevalent in Germany, and many non-Jews recognized the significant losses which the Jews had endured for the greater good of France. The victory was as much theirs as anyone's, and they could share in that victory as *French*.

Unfortunately, the inter-war years would take a turn for the worse with the onset of economic hardships. Just as in Germany and elsewhere in Europe, depression in the 1930s would hit the working class hard. Hard times have a tendency to produce political unrest, and France was no different. Low production rates and high unemployment caused a sharp increase in xenophobia, meaning the large influx of foreign Jews between 1906 and 1939 could no longer be ignored. The immigrant worker was seen as a usurper of jobs, and a threat to the economy. For roughly thirty years immigrants, from Eastern Europe primarily, had been streaming into France; helped along by the high producing factories looking for workers. Now, with production at a standstill, the anti-immigrant diatribe was unleashed.

Looking specifically at the Jewish population of France, the large influx of immigrants wrought huge changes in the composition of French Jewry, leading scholars like Paula Hyman to

refer to this as the period of “Immigration and the remaking of French Jewry.”¹⁴ Between 1919 and 1929 the Jewish population in France doubled from only 150,000 to nearly 300,000, due almost exclusively to immigration from the east. As the *pogroms* in Russia were taking place, refugees fled into the safe haven they saw in France, aided by the French desire to revitalize an economy severely damaged by the First World War.

These immigrants, however, were of a different variety of Jew than the French public had witnessed before. The Jewish communities of France were assimilated, French speaking, and largely unobservant. The immigrants from the east brought with them a manner of speech, dress, and conduct that was altogether foreign. In a time when immigrants were already ostracized for the strain they placed on the job market, the Jew became the most visible sign of immigrant non-conformity. By *choosing* to represent a distinct group in the society, their presence moved counter to traditional notions of the French nation.

The Jewish leadership of France, particularly the Central Consistory, saw their duty to be the incorporation of immigrants into the community as quickly as possible. They urged adoption of the French language, and the practice of French customs. Adolphe Caen, member of the Central Consistory, declared, “Since the Dreyfus affair, the consistories have not been faced by a question so important for French Judaism as that of Foreigners” (Hyman 147). Native Jewry was torn between wanting to embrace their brethren and a fear that their overt “otherness” would derail the social cohesion they had built through almost two hundred years of assimilation.

Thus, we come to our fourth characteristic of French Jewry: the belief that, while they are tied to the Jewish people in spirit, their loyalties ultimately lie with France, the protector of their rights. Some members of the Jewish community actually echoed the xenophobia of the society

¹⁴ A chapter title from her 1998 book *The Jews of Modern France*, (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1998) 115-135.

at large, such as Robert de Rothschild, president of the Paris Consistory, who expressed his view that the immigrants were “still insufficiently familiar with the French mentality and customs” and that they should “abstain...from all political demonstrations”. He concludes with an affirmation that “If [they] are not happy here, let them leave. They are guests whom we have warmly received, but they should not go about rocking the boat” (as cited in Hyman 149-50).

Some of the Jewish reactions to anti-Semitism of this period seem to reflect this belief that it was not they who were the target of the hatred, but rather their strange and foreign coreligionists. They were confident that the government, who was not yet actively sponsoring anti-Semitism, would quell the rising tide (as indicated by the passage of acts like the Daladier Marchandreau decree, which prohibited the defamation of any individual in the press based on their religion). This resulted in a markedly positive estimation of *native* Jewish positions in society. Marc Bloch, for example, affirmed:

“I have, through life, felt that I was above all, and quite simply, a Frenchman. A family tradition, already of long date, has bound me firmly to my country. I have found nourishment in her spiritual heritage and in her history. I can, indeed, think of no other land whose air I could have breathed with such a sense of ease and freedom. I have loved her greatly, and served her with all my strength. I have never found that the fact of being a Jew has at all hindered these sentiments.” (Cited in Zuccotti 27)

His references to “A family tradition, already of long date” indicate his comfort with his family’s well established lineage in France. For those that cannot claim such a history, their connection to France not only as a Jew but also as a foreigner is tenuous.

It has been hinted rather vaguely until now that a period was fast approaching in which the state would be an active participant and sponsor of anti-Semitism. Until this point the assimilated Jews of France maintained faith in the Republic which had liberated them over a century before. Though, as the economic crises of the thirties gradually increased, laws were

instituted which could be seen as anti-Semitic (in a period where the vast majority of refugees were Jewish it becomes difficult to extricate anti-Semitism from xenophobia), the rights of native Jews had, at least, been upheld. However, with the fall of France to the Nazi army in June of 1940, a *new État Français* (French State) would emerge, bringing French Jews face to face with persecution in previously unthinkable ways.

The Vichy regime, headed by Marshal Philippe Pétain, quickly signed on to the Nazi desire to make Europe *judenrein* (cleansed of all Jews). As a result, Pétain would institute racially discriminatory laws before and even without the insistence of the German Reich. France, with few exceptions, had not questioned the right of all citizens since the Revolution of 1789. Yet, on October 3, 1940 the Vichy government introduced decrees¹⁵ concerning Jews, which would exclude Jews from a number of official positions.

The active persecution of Jews *by* the French government was a devastating blow to the assimilated French Jewry. Though tensions had been mounting for some time, Jews (particularly native Jews) maintained faith that their liberators would not become their oppressors. Even as the anti-Semitic legislation continued to be penned, Jews grasped at the last hope that these decrees were enforced by the Reich and not by their homeland. Prominent Jewish leaders along with the Central Consistory sent a long letter to Marshal Pétain, expressing their dismay and the fact that they “*wish*” to believe these persecutions to be a direct result of Nazi impositions, hoping that the French state has “tried their best to attenuate their rigors” (Hyman, *Holocaust in France* 167).

¹⁵ These decrees defined as any practicing or non-practicing individual with at least two grandparents of Jewish race if they were married to a Jew and at least three if they were married to a gentile. These laws bear a striking resemblance to the Nuremberg Laws, which involve a complicated system of Jewish blood status based on ancestry (broken into three categories of Jew, *Mischling* (half blood) of the first or second degree). Originally intended only to apply to officials and authority figures within the government (and by extension any branch of the civil service) it was liberally applied to individuals whose rank was as low as soldier.

Wishing they could find a way to excuse their beloved *patrie* for its actions, the Jewish leaders were forced to grapple with incontrovertible evidence that the country of their birth was no longer in accord with their beliefs. This reversal of allegiance had various effects on individuals, some maintaining their faith in what they saw to be the true France (before the rise of the Vichy government), and others abandoning their French identity in favor of another. For some, such as scholar Ora Avni, the question must be raised “if to be a Frenchman is to adhere to an anti-Semitic state program, how can a Jew be French?” (Avni 236). The proceeding years would have a deep effect on the makeup of French Jewry. Eliminating one third from its number, encouraging others to emigrate, and scarring the psyche of Jew and non-Jew alike, the *Shoah* in France would create a veritable impact crater in its wake.

3.0 NARRATING TRAUMA AND IDENTITY

Manifestations of Jewishness in Survivor Narratives

The previous historical section has provided a framework which presents two historical narratives, two group memories; one being the history of France and the Republic, and the other being the history of Jews worldwide. The history of Jews in France appears cyclical in nature, fluctuating between periods of acceptance and exile (which is, in fact, a common theme in world Jewish history). The importance of such a lengthy discourse on the history of Jews in France is made manifest when one begins to look at the writings of French survivor authors. To understand the point from which each author is speaking, it is necessary to acknowledge how much or how little they tap into the shared history of France, and/or the collective histories of Jews.

Philosopher Maurice Halbwachs' notion of "collective memory" is helpful in talking about this dichotomy. Each individual has a variety of narratives at his disposal, which they can draw upon in the construction of their own unique identity. The degree to which narrators *identify* with a collective memory (either through self identification or through a third party assignment) determines the composition of their identities. In this way, each individual's identity is composed of multiple, often shifting, parts; a unique personal identity, and a more group-oriented identity.

We see then that there is a multitude of potential identities which can shift with time and context, and vary from individual to individual. In an effort to explore *some* of these possible constructions we will examine the works of four survivor authors, in light of the historical narratives already discussed. The works of Joseph Joffo and Paul Steinberg will inform our exploration of Jewish identity from the Jewish perspective, and the works of Charlotte Delbo and David Rousset will compose our view of Jewishness from a non-Jewish perspective. In examining these texts, both individually and in dialogue, some of the nuances of the identity construction that takes place *vis à vis* the *Shoah* can be explored.

Each author, in the telling of his story, creates a narrative that reflects a personal choice. Each must choose to either ignore the distinction between the “Jews” and the “French” (following the prewar collective memory of the *République*, as is done by David Rousset, Paul Steinberg, and others) or to recognize the inherent differences in a Jewish versus French experience of the *Shoah* (recognition and thus creation of a distinct Jewish collective memory, as Charlotte Delbo and Joseph Joffo do). Amos Morris-Reich terms this distinction “specific difference,” to wit:

...the common features that are part of what distinguishes the thing from a larger group and, at the same time, makes it part of a smaller group of things, the members of which can be distinguished as individuals. Applied to our case, “specific difference” is what the Jews share with each other but what they may or may not share with other members of humanity. (Morris-Reich 102)

The recognition of something which either does or does not set Jews apart becomes a point of differentiation for individual narrators.

In the case of France, there is the national memory; the founding of the *République*, the triumph of democracy, the inclusion of all. The national memory of France includes such events as the storming of the Bastille, the *Déclaration des Droits de l’Homme et du Citoyen*, and the

bravery of French troops in First World War amongst others. All of these events help to construct the feeling of patriotism and contribute to the “essence” of Frenchness. The narrative, however, does not stop evolving. The collective memory continues to change with time, introducing new elements which each individual can selectively extract as part of their unique identity, or reject as antithetical to their conception of Frenchness.

The Jewish collective memory is somewhat more complex, owing to the diversity of experiences throughout the Diaspora. Effectively, it cannot be said that there is any “one” Jewish collective memory, something that scholars like Amos Morris-Reich analyze at length.¹⁶ If we are to look for a common theme in the *various* Jewish collective memories, however, it would be the notion of the exile; the Diaspora experience itself. For over two thousand years, the Jews have been wanderers, strangers, and outsiders. Being stateless, they were by nature part of no group other than their own.

For the Jews of Eastern Europe, this continued to be the case well into the twentieth century. However, for the Jews of France, this collective memory could be suspended with the passing of the inclusivity legislation, after the French Revolution. No longer “outsiders” they had the freedom to embrace a different collective memory, and contribute to its continued evolution. Though I do not for a moment suggest that the two must be mutually exclusive, the aforementioned assimilation points to an overwhelming trend towards the rejection of the Jewish narrative *in favor of* the French. However, with the rise of the Vichy government, the old narrative was abruptly thrust back upon them, forcing them to reconsider their place within the *new regime*.

¹⁶ For more on Morris-Reich’s appraisal of the situation, see “Three Paradigms of ‘The Negative Jew’: Identity’ from Simmel to Zizek,” *Jewish Social Studies* 10.2 (2004): 179–214.

In France, the schism between these collective memories occurs when state policy becomes *openly* anti-Semitic. When the two narratives no longer intersect, or when access to one of these narratives is cut off, a crisis emerges, and the survivor is left to reassemble the scattered pieces. Though this most directly applies to Jewish survivors, the same can equally be said of non-Jewish survivors, such as Delbo, who must also struggle with a rupture in what they have always perceived as the French way. Annette Wieviorka depicts this dilemma when she explains that:

For the Jews of France, whether French for generations or immigrants, it was difficult, and perhaps impossible to acknowledge that the French model of emancipation and integration, born of the Revolution and barely compromised by the Dreyfus affair, could have been rendered null and void by the Vichy government. They did not understand that they could be expelled *de facto* from the French nation, that their French citizenship meant nothing to the occupying forces, that they had become merely Jews to annihilate. The main difficulty in fully perceiving the Holocaust seems to stem from a deep, essential dilemma; the inability to grasp that they could belong to a Jewish collective, be it envisioned as a community, people, or nation. (Wieviorka 139)

This could just as easily apply to non-Jews, who must grapple with the idea that all Frenchmen are not equal, and that individual identity can supersede the national identity.

For many, the shift abruptly occurred with the receipt of the mandatory yellow star (or, for non-Jews, in first seeing others wearing them). The star was a physical sign that marked Jews from non-Jews; something that made explicit what was not clearly identifiable. One author who distinctly embodies this shift is Joseph Joffo, in his memoir *Un Sac de Billes (A Bag of Marbles)*. Joffo gives an explicitly narrated account of the moment when he ceased being French, and “put on” the identity of *un Juif*. The son of Jewish Russian immigrants, Joffo had lived comfortably in the 18th Arrondissement of Paris, above his father’s barbershop. Having received his star at breakfast, Joffo and his brother leave for school, uncertain of the reactions that await them:

Are we going to have the stars on for a long time?" I ask him.
He stops to look at me.
"How should I know? Why—does it bother you?"
I shrug. "Why should it bother me?" ...
...Maurice snickers.
"If the star doesn't bother you, how come you've got your muffler over it?"
That guy always has to see everything. (19)¹⁷

Though he does not know why, there is a sense of embarrassment that comes from wearing the star with the word "*JUIF*" boldly emblazoned across it. Though it is from a child's perspective that this discourse takes place, the slight embarrassment that might ensue when he is perceived differently by his friends is exactly the same as that of the adults. Adult Jews, who until now have had no problems mixing amongst their countrymen, will be forced to declare their Jewishness outright. With a single piece of cloth, Joseph's identity has completely changed; his position in society has been upset. To fear the consequences of their Jewishness is a natural response.

Upon arriving at school, Joffo encounters the moment he has been dreading; confrontation with his schoolmates who only a day before knew him as Joseph, but now will know him as "Jew".

He looks at me, stares at my chest, and his eyes grow round. I swallow.
Silence seems like forever when you're a kid.
'Jesus, you're lucky' he murmurs. 'That star sure is a beauty.'
Maurice laughs and so do I. What a feeling of relief...
...'You know, it looks like a medal or something'...
...Actually, it's the truth: it *is* just like a big medal. Maybe it doesn't shine, but you sure can't miss seeing it. (20)

And sure enough, the other kids at school "can't miss seeing it" either, though their reactions are not as positive as his young friend. Joseph and Maurice's arrival incites the anger of two older boys, who immediately begin verbally abusing them. They are blamed for causing the war,

¹⁷ Unless I intend to comment on particular issues in a translation, or I feel that the translation does not convey the full context of the author's expression, I will include only the translated passage and pagination for the citation.

being in France, for wanting to take over the world, and a host of other crimes these young boys could not possibly have committed. Joffo's response perhaps best phrases the effect of the star on his life:

What was happening? I was a kid like any other – with marbles, games, clouts on the ear, lessons to learn. Papa was a barber, and my brothers too. Mama did the cooking. On Sunday, Papa took us to Longchamp to see the horses and get some fresh air; on the other days, there was school – and that's all there was. Now all of a sudden they stick a few square inches of cloth on me and I turn into a Jew.

A Jew. What does that mean anyway? What the hell is a Jew?

I feel anger welling up in me, along with the helpless rage of not understanding. (21)

Frustrated, angry, and now, alone, Joffo is forced to deal with the harsh reality of his new persona. He is fighting with his inability to come to terms with his new fate, a fate that he can no longer share with the gentile population of France.

When Joseph returns home, to inquire of his father "What is a Jew," the response is equally confused:

Papa scratched his head.

"Well, it's kind of embarrassing to say this, Joseph, but the fact is that I'm really not very sure...

... "Long ago," he began, "we were living in a country and they drove us out, so we scattered all over. This happens every so often—just the way it's happening now. You might say the hunting season is on again, so we've got to go away and hide (35).

Joseph's father has an image of Jewishness that is rooted in his own family history; the history of the Jews of Russia. Each night he tells his children the stories of their grandfather, and his flight from the anti-Semitic Czar of Russia. For the Joffo family, Jewishness is firmly rooted in this exile experience, the experience of being an outsider in every land. From his father, Joseph has inherited the memory of Jewish exclusion and isolation, a memory he would not identify with unless it was actualized (as it would be during the *Shoah*). Until France turns on her Jewish

citizens, the tales of escape are merely bedtime stories for Joseph. However, with the institution of the star, they become waking nightmares, and a mode of thinking through which Joffo can discuss the loss of his French identity.

For Joseph, there is no substance to his picture of Jewishness. It is composed only of the treatment that he receives from others. Essentially, a third party designates him as a Jew, and his self-constructed identity is impacted in turn. Remarking on this, Joseph says

I was the same color as they were, my face was the same. I'd heard of different religions, and they told me at school that people used to fight over that a long time ago, but I didn't have any religion; on Thursdays I even went to the church club with the other kids from the neighborhood (25).

He is completely puzzled by the turn of events, and remarks that the most striking memory from this day was not the physical assault, but rather, his complete inability to comprehend what had happened.

When Joffo questions what it means to be Jewish, and cannot come up with a satisfactory answer (apart from his classmates' chants of derogatory slurs, and physical abuse), he typifies what Amos Morris-Reich calls "the Negative Jew". Morris-Reich defines "the Negative Jew" as the image that arises from a series of texts which depicted "Jews as lacking any common essence, as individuals who are Jews by the mere fact that they are denoted as Jews by others" (Morris-Reich 100). What *initially* makes Joffo Jewish is the placement of his star and the social exclusion that ensues. Anti-Semitism, then, is not merely the basis of his identity; but, with the receipt of the star, it is its totality.

Joffo's ignorance of Jewish religious practice is also characteristic of "the negative Jew." As Morris-Reich indicates, "It is important to note that the "negative Jew" engages himself with Jewishness, and not Judaism" (103). Joffo has no intention of suddenly keeping *kashrut*, wrapping *tefillin*, or going to *shul* simply because he was handed a star at breakfast. Instead, he

seeks to understand his new identity as it correlates to others. Note that the preface to his inquiries on religion was in relation to others; their skin color, their facial features, and *their* respective faiths. It was not an introspective approach, but rather a comparative one. If he can be Jewish without being of the Jewish faith (a possibility he has just witnessed), he concludes that Jewishness must lie outside of things as simple as religious observance.

Joffo represents a rather unique case study, because he explicitly comments on his identity struggles throughout his narrative *and* in other writings. At the request of his readers, Joffo writes a post-script to subsequent editions of his text, which he calls *Dialogue avec mes lecteurs*. This dialogue allows him to expand on points of interest, answer questions that he has received, and comment on the ways that his life has changed since. It is within this text that we find the resolution to his dilemma.

In the narrative, the identity crisis is handled from the child's point of view, which cannot form a basis for a Jewish identity, apart from the anti-Semitism (that which he has heard about from his father and that which he experiences firsthand). Only later in life, after living through the *Shoah* could Joffo fully articulate a "positive" Jewish identity. Whereas some rejected Jewishness because of their experience, remaining in the "negative Jew" stage, Joffo transcended this level and sought out a substance on which to base his identity. In later life, after reflecting on the experiences he depicts in his works, Joffo would form this conception of Jewishness:

Je vous dirai maintenant ce que signifie pour moi être juif, en France, ou ailleurs, au vingtième siècle. Je pense que c'est être héritier d'une grande tradition religieuse qui remonte à Abraham, père des grandes religions monothéistes, à Moïse, le prophète des prophètes, le seul homme qui ait rencontré Dieu, qui l'ait entendu. (*Dialogue avec mes lecteurs* 247)

I would tell you now what it means for me to be Jewish, in France, or elsewhere, in the twentieth century. I think it is to be heir to a great religious tradition, which traces back to Abraham, father of the great monotheistic

religions, to Moses, the prophet of prophets, the only man who has met God, who has heard Him.

This idea of being “heir” to a tradition would place him in kinship with fellow heirs to said tradition, finally giving him a group with which to identify, and, substance to a sorely lacking conception of self.

Previous to the receipt of his star, Joffo’s notion of Jewishness did not extend past his family. His father, his brothers, and his mother were all certainly Jewish, but this was more an afterthought to their dominant positions as family, barbers, or immigrants. Joffo felt so disconnected from the “universal Jew” of which Morris-Reich speaks, that he saw no harm in a poster of “The Jew trying to take over the world.” The infamous poster depicting a spider whose legs grip the entire globe, with a large nose and fat lips, was seen by Joffo as insignificant. He tells the reader that “The poster didn’t bother us one way or another: the monster wasn’t us. We weren’t spiders and thank G-d, we didn’t have faces like that...It was simple: I wasn’t the Jew” (22).

In order to escape capture and deportation, Joffo’s father sends his two sons on a trek across France to the unoccupied zone. The process of running from Nazi capture becomes the vehicle for the development of a Jewish identity, presenting him with opportunities to construct a concept of family and *belonging*, rather than *believing*. Throughout his work, Joseph is seeking a connection to the people surrounding him. Repeatedly, he tries to reach out to his fellow Jews, all the while struggling with his father’s commands to never reveal his Jewishness. Before he and his brother leave on their journey toward freedom, Joseph’s father instructs them not to “even let on to your closest friend. Don’t even whisper it under your breath—always deny it” (34).

From the very outset his Jewish identity is problematic. It is a presence which he is told about by his father, but instantly ordered to keep silent at all costs. This taboo will have a significant impact on his Jewish development as he seeks to give meaning to what baffled him on the school playground. Though he is not permitted to vocalize his own identity, he permits his mind to ruminate on the still unanswered question of “what is a Jew.” Part of this research consists in looking out for other Jews, leading him to wonder who the crowds of people might be that flood the train station. He asks himself “Are they Jews, too?” (37) as if looking for fellow travelers.

Later, when he and his brother are preparing to sneak across the border into unoccupied France, they risk their own safety to help a Jew and his family make it across by inviting them to join their party through the woods. Though they do not reveal their own Jewish identity, the compassion shown to a fellow Jew is the first step in their road to self discovery. Of the two young boys, Joseph had the most trouble in fighting the urge to reveal himself to others, one particular test proving harder than the rest during his encounter with a Jewish woman who nursed him back to health when he was being held in Nice as a suspected Jew.

After falling ill in the detention center (a commandeered hotel), the woman tends to him every day, and when asked why she does not wear a white coat like the doctors and nurses, she responds that:

“This isn’t a hospital and I’m not a nurse”...

... “Well, then why are you taking care of me?”

She turned aside and began to plump up my pillows. Before I could ask another question, she said simply, “I’m Jewish.”

I never had more trouble resisting the overwhelming urge to tell her, “Me too,” but I couldn’t do it; that was out of the question. At that very moment there might be men listening behind the door. I didn’t answer but I caught her neck as she went by and kissed her. She kissed me in return, stroked my cheek with her fingers and went out. (213)

Joseph is struggling with the desire to commiserate; to acknowledge their bond. Since his connection to his French identity has ruptured, he seeks the company of someone who understands his pain; someone who is also struggling to find their place in a hostile world. The woman cared for him out of her own need for camaraderie, and, though Joffo cannot safely reveal his Jewishness to her, the kiss and embrace shared between the two as she leaves is enough to communicate their connection.

The bonds which Joffo developed through his experience became a pivotal event in his own personal history. The formative notion of the *Shoah* which we have developed throughout the historical section takes on a more literal meaning in his case. The *Shoah* is the bridge between his childhood and his adulthood; it is the whole of his adolescence. Although he does not explicitly state the way that his adult is different from his child, the fact that his most formative years were consumed by the *Shoah* is a good indication that it was a significant factor in shaping the adult he has become today.

Because the *Shoah* prompted the actualization of his Jewish identity, and was also the period in which he became an adult, his post-*Shoah* self is hyper-aware of Jewishness. The adult narrator constructing his story cannot disconnect from this awareness of Jewishness, leading him to use the word repeatedly in the first chapter. The adult narrator (post-*Shoah*) can look back and see the irony in some events in his life, such as the arrival of two SS guards at his father's barbershop. Joseph and his brother stood in front of the sign that marked the store as a Jewish store, tricking the guards into entering for haircuts; something he finds "crazy" and "too far" as an adult (7), yet something which he and his brother found highly amusing at the time. He describes the incident at length, displaying his hyper-awareness of Jewishness throughout, including his description of their entrance in the shop, noting that:

Inside the shop, in the most intense silence that could ever have reigned in a barbershop, two SS men from a Death's head unit sat with their knees pressed together. Among the *Jewish* clients they waited—waited to entrust the napes of their necks to my *Jewish* father or to my *Jewish* brothers.

Outside, two little *Jews* doubled up with laughter. (6, emphasis mine)

As a child, Joffo merely found this incident amusing, thinking merely that the Germans “disliked” Jews, but not *really* grasping the enormity of what they had done. As discussed previously, his pre-*Shoah* childhood was so devoid of Jewish awareness that his overt explication of their Jewishness seems to be a product of a post-*Shoah*, adult sensibility. As an adult, Joffo can see that this game was too deadly, too dangerous.

The end of this same scene becomes our first display of pride in Jewish identity. As Joseph's father strikes up conversation with the two Nazis about the war, the entire shop, full of Jews, hears them exclaim that “Oh the war is terrible...the Jews are to blame” (10). Without missing a beat, Joffo's father continues the haircut, and, after the two men pay, he informs them that *everyone* in the shop was Jewish. In unison, every man in the shop rose to his feet, and stood proud (even the only gentile in the room, a devout Catholic, rose to his feet). This scene moved the young Joffo to tears (11).

The first few chapters become a retrospective on the naiveté of childhood, and a commentary on the transition from child to adult. This leads to the use of images like a child with a marble as being like a giant with the world in his pocket (1). This feeling is used to show the collapse of that very world a few pages later. The marble introduced on the very first page of the narrative creates a theme that will inform much of the ensuing journey; the notion of play and acting. In his *Dialogue avec mes lecteurs*, Joffo speaks of “play” as a means of trying out roles that one cannot take on in real life. Children play in order to put on different hats and groom their identities for the future.

Throughout the narrative, play remains an important theme which provides relief from the dangers they face, training for the obstacles they have yet to experience, and a tool for integrating into the communities through which they move. It becomes a way to work through dreams, desires, and fears. The child playing at marbles, with “all the planets” in his pocket (1), is experiencing a reality he will not see actualized. The endless possibility and feelings of security that the marble gives Joffo are crushed in an instant when he packs up his things and leaves childhood forever. Joffo, as a Jew, will not regain the sense of security and potential from the marble again, making it one more remnant of his previous self.

The notion of the *Shoah* as a formative experience is a common thread in survivor narratives, and one author makes it even more explicit. Paul Steinberg, a German-born Jew growing up in the posh sixteenth arrondissement of Paris, speaks of the *Shoah* as *the* pivotal moment in his life: “It took me years to realize that Auschwitz had been the decisive event in my life, that a profound change had taken place in me. I saw the world through different eyes and the world saw me differently, too” (159).

Inclusive in this new view on life is the reconnection with his Jewishness, however disdainful his approach to this identity may sometimes be. As a Jewish immigrant to France (coming as part of the wave of immigration after the First World War), he already has a very clearly constructed notion of self as a misfit and other. His insistence of this fact at the outset of his work will become important in later analysis, where we see him visibly struggling with his connection to others, Jews and non-Jewish Frenchmen alike.

It should be said from the outset that Steinberg is operating within a very specific discourse. Whereas, Joffo was explicitly involved in a discussion on Jewishness between himself and his readers (as made clear by his *Dialogue*), Steinberg’s *Chroniques d’ailleurs*

(*Chronicles of Elsewhere*)¹⁸ is written in opposition and apposition to other survivor narratives about *his own* identity. He catches himself participating in this dialogue, and decides to make it clear to the reader that he “must not let the writings of other witnesses affect” him (62), despite the fact that he makes repeated references to the things that “other witnesses” are saying about him and his experience.

Just as Joffo sought to construct his Jewish identity through comparison with others, Steinberg is constructing his notion of self (both as survivor and Jew) in relation to the narrative construction of his identity through the accounts of others. His wish to remain unaffected by other testimonials is a moot point, because their presence is evident throughout. He admits to having read Levi’s description of himself (through the character of Henri),¹⁹ and devotes several pages to reflections on whether or not he was (or is) the cold and calculating individual that Levi portrays.

In the end he wonders if he “could have persuaded him to change his verdict by showing him that there were extenuating circumstances” (131). His narrative, then, can be seen in many ways as a response to Levi; an attempt to “ask clemency of the jury” (131) represented by Levi’s readership. He ends this rather brief chapter devoted to his relationship with Levi by asking

¹⁸ Steinberg’s text appears in English Translation entitled *Speak You Also*, a reference to the Paul Celan poem that precedes the text. Unless otherwise noted, all English citations are taken from this version of the text. Where necessary (due to what I see to be discrepancies between the two versions) the French original will be cited first, with the English edition following.

¹⁹ Primo Levi, Italian intellectual and Shoah survivor, is one of the most well known authors in the canon. As a chemist, he worked alongside Steinberg in the “lab” set up in Auschwitz. In his work *Se Questo è un Uomo*, Levi paints a rather judgmental portrait of Steinberg, whom he renames Henri. Amongst other characteristics, Levi depicts Steinberg as cold, calculating, ruthless, and manipulative. He describes a sensation of feeling taken advantage of in every interaction with Steinberg. Reading both texts, it is easy to see them as being in dialogue with each other, despite the years that separate them (Levi was published in French in 1951).

“Can one be so guilty for having survived?” (131): a question, it seems, he is exploring throughout his text.

As the last written of our four texts, Steinberg cannot remove the influence of these “other witnesses,” since he has spent the last forty years reading them. His text was published in 1996, though portions of the text were written long before this date and attempts to write had been started throughout his post-*Shoah* years. The first draft took the form of an unfinished narrative, originally being imagined as a fictional novel. The entire novel centered on a single factual event which he describes in his memoir; an incident where, as a newly appointed *Stubendienst*²⁰, he lashes out and slaps an “old Polish Jew” (127).

Just as Joffo was hyper-aware of Jewishness in his description of the barbershop scene, Steinberg repeatedly uses the word “Jew” in his retelling, stressing for the reader that he attacked one of his own. He is so consumed by the guilt of his action that he describes the feeling of being “haunted” by the memory for the rest of his life. He knows that the man later dies, and, until his own death, Steinberg assures us that he “carried him inside...like an embryo” (127). The novel, which he intended to call “The Slap,” becomes a chapter heading instead. The main character (Steinberg) eventually eases the guilt he feels from the event by committing suicide, something Steinberg admits he feared, stating: “The logical ending for my hero was suicide. I suppose I felt I might wind up imitating him” (127). The text remained unfinished, tucked away in his closet.

He spends the first chapter of his finished work talking about his “Apprenticeship;” the notion that his entire childhood was merely preparation for the experience of camp living. He spent much of his life bouncing from place to place, with no friends, no stable family, and no

²⁰ A camp appointed barracks orderly, responsible for training his block to make their beds, salute properly, etc.

sense of belonging. Being born in Germany, then moving to France, Spain, and France again, Steinberg and his family held no passports, but rather identity cards for “Stateless Persons.” Ironically, these are exactly the words frequently used to describe the Jewish condition; being strangers in a host country.

Though he does not describe feeling particularly “Jewish” in his youth, he does recount an experience of his first “racist attack” (35), which strikes the reader as distinctly Jewish in character. In one of his family’s many migrations, he finds himself in a classroom in Jeanson-de-Sailly where his sixth grade teacher loudly declares him “heimatlos,” German for stateless person. A surface explanation of this encounter would be a mere allusion to the fact that he and his parents were migrants. However, Steinberg’s choice of terminology makes it clear that we are not supposed to interpret in this fashion. He describes the slur as being “raciste” inferring that there is something deeper to his statelessness.

In a more metaphysical sense, the condition of statelessness is his experience of the Exile, the wandering that Jews across the world experienced until the restoration of the Jewish state in 1948. Jews in France thought the exile was finally over, actually expressing as much in their writings.²¹ They would discover later that their welcome was short-lived. Steinberg’s early family life portrays this same experience; searching for a home, bouncing from place to place, thinking they had found a home in France, and finally coming face to face with a deportation notice.

Steinberg’s being in exile is not, in his and the teacher’s view, a mere coincidence. Rather, it is something that is in the essence of his being: a *racial* characteristic. In accepting the slur as a racist remark, Steinberg acknowledges his access to the collective memory of

²¹ For more on the reactions of Jews to liberation and life in France, see Paula Hyman, *From Dreyfus to Vichy* (1979)

Jewishness; the condition of exile. No matter what the intention of the teacher, Steinberg's interpretation and presentation of his remarks speak to his status as an outsider, a wanderer, and stranger, which we have previously identified as the most likely candidate for commonality amongst the Diaspora Jewry. The fact that the slur awakens this type of reaction in Steinberg suggest that he is aware of his place in Jewish history, and can recognize the treatment he receives as a member of the Jewish people.

Despite his family's constant wandering, he does have a conception of himself as French. Even if this is a marginal identity, it is something he can share with his compatriots. Whereas Joffo lost this sensibility with the imposition of the star, Steinberg's realization of his new fate comes quite late in his experience of oppression. After being arrested and sent to Drancy, Steinberg, along with others, still does not realize he is no longer part of the French people. It takes deportation to Auschwitz to teach him that. Steinberg relays this fact in his description of Drancy inmates huddling around a smuggled wireless, listening as "The Free French were addressing the French people, and we hadn't yet realized we no longer belonged among them" (30). This blow comes in the camps, when Steinberg relays his struggles to simply feel human, let alone French (69).

The constant struggle to live with the memory of the *Shoah* is actualized most often in Steinberg's struggle to live with the person he became as a result. Steinberg is caught in a pull between acknowledging his place as a survivor, a Jew, a member of a collectivity, and the overwhelming desire to remain independent and unattached. Throughout the memoir, he displays a certain emotive distance from his Jewishness, which he creates and maintains through sarcasm and irony.

He frequently describes parts of his experience with visible and ironic disdain, calling the shaving of inmates heads a visit to the “salon de coiffure” (a beauty salon) (43), or the recovery block of the hospital “Bora Bora” (the tropical island in French Polynesia) (78). This impulse gives rise to numerous offhand comments, such as the idea “that being one of the chosen people was not the fashion of the day, or even yesterday, let alone the days to come” (6). The sarcasm he employs to discuss such dark periods of his existence serves to separate the pain from these memories, simultaneously displaying the bitterness he still struggles with after his experience.

Similar displays of his ambivalence and bitterness specifically towards his Jewishness are plentiful, such as his assessment of the Jewish cemetery in Berlin where his mother’s grave lies; calling it “the old Jewish cemetery...that ravaged junkyard of families, their descendants extinguished because they burned so well” (6). He is struggling with the same frustration that Joffo felt when he could not comprehend why Jews should be persecuted as they are. Steinberg’s anger and frustration find root in sarcasm, and disdain. He is working through a simultaneous desire to belong, and be excluded; to remain independent, yet claim his stake in the history of his people, or, to use his words, his “tribe” (9).

He comments explicitly on this troubled identity in the closing passages of his memoir, entitled “*Rétrovision*” (Hindsight). He describes himself as:

“avoir été, être toujours, un Juif *atypique*, mécréant, détaché des us et coutumes et des traditions...

...J’ai eu très tôt conscience du fait que le rejet et la haine sont les compagnons de route imposés du Juif. Tapis dans son ombre. Une partie prenante.

Au gré du hasard, dans un lieu ou un autre, une ou deux générations se trouvent épargnées ; c’est pour que la suivante subisse des épreuves plus impitoyables et plus cruelles encore.

De cette expérience étalée sur deux millénaires découle une forme de philosophie qui frôle parfois la superstition. Le vœu informulé de bénéficier de la chance dans le malheur. Humble ambition considérée comme une faveur, une bénédiction divine.

Pourquoi diable cette chance m'a-t-elle été dévolue à moi, *marginal de la judaïcité*? Le hasard a de ces sursauts d'humour à la Bernard Shaw qui doivent laisser perplexes les piliers de synagogue. (151)

I feel I've always been—and still am—an atypical Jew, a non-believer, [detached from] Jewish ways and traditions...

Very early in life I realized that rejection and hatred have dogged the Jew relentlessly. Lurking in his shadow. An inescapable part of him. By some quirk of fate, a generation or two might be spared here or there, so that the next one may suffer even crueller and more pitiless tribulations.

Two thousand years of such experience have led to a form of philosophy that sometimes borders on superstition. The unspoken wish to run into some good luck in the midst of misfortune. A humble ambition seen as a favor, a divine blessing.

Why the devil did that blessing fall on me, [misfit of Jewishness]? Dumb luck can come up with twists of Shavian wit that must leave the stalwarts of the synagogue completely baffled. (Coverdale 157-58 [with my modifications])

Steinberg is fluctuating between a certain disdain for, and an embracing of his Jewish identity. The very recognition of his Jewishness comes through his insistence that he is “atypical,” and “detached.” Just as in Sartre’s conception of anti-Semitism, where the Jew is created so that the anti-Semite can destroy him, the Jew in Steinberg is created to show the ways in which Steinberg both is and *is not he*. He makes mention of the troubled past, a certain bitterness detectable even at a distance, yet it is a past that he acknowledges to be his own.

The last paragraph, musing on his receipt of an undeserved blessing, serves as a good picture of the dilemma he faces. His notion of Jewish history and his place within it depicts a self identity that is aware of the imposed status as a representative of Jewishness, yet he is uncomfortable with the fact that *he*, with his marginal connection to Jewishness, should be the one to be chosen. Of all the better representatives, he thinks the fact that he is chosen is almost laughable.

Prior to this closing chapter he maintained that his entire childhood was training for his “attendance” of Auschwitz, a place in which he could excel and survive. This same instinct,

which led Levi to paint him as cold and calculating, was a result of the life he led before deportation. He reflects that:

It had all been anticipated, methodically put into place: I had the advantage of an intensive and extensive preparation for life in a concentration camp. A kind of immersion course. It's all there: the continual displacements and readjustments, the absence of ties and enduring friendships, a hostile environment. Unable to rely on any outside support, I was trained for solitary combat. (39)

His rather ego-centric view of history provides him with the satisfaction that his rather bleak childhood, being enough to drive him to attempted suicide at one point (39), became the tool that helped him survive where many others perished. However, recall the previously cited explanation which comes at the end of his writing; the “*rétrovision*,” which attributes his survival to an undeserved “divine blessing.” Here again he displays an uncertainty; he is unsure whether to attribute his success to his own actions, or to a reprieve from God.

Despite his resistance to his identity, the collective memory of Judaism (being roughly two thousand years of persecution) perfectly describes his life. He calls himself “atypical” and then proceeds to describe a Judaism in which he undoubtedly fits. His entire picture of Jewishness is constructed around persecution, a fact that he frequently alludes to in the text. The overwhelming majority of overt Jewish references come through descriptions of suffering or persecution. For instance, when he is taken to a cell to await deportation, he remarks that he “spent the night in cell 10, where the sons of Abraham, Moses, and Jacob passed through in procession for three years” (11). He is including himself in this suffering, noting that he, like the others, is here because of his being a part of that collective of heirs.

The history to which Steinberg alludes in his text is the same collective memory upon which Joffo draws in his own construction of an identity. And, like Joffo, Steinberg falls largely in the category of “the negative Jew;” having a conception of Jewishness that is fully based on

suffering and otherness. Being an independent individual with an unsteady home life, and no *real* parental guidance (as far as he can be trusted on this fact) Steinberg had no access to receive the collective memory of Jewishness, as Joffo had from his father relaying the story of his grandfather's escape of the pogroms and forced labor battalions.

Not only did Steinberg lack the inheritance of the collective memory, he was subsequently denied a literary paradigm for constructing his own narrative. Whereas Joffo could tap into his grandfather's experience and manifest their similarities through descriptions of dreams and fantasies, Steinberg was left to cobble together non-Jewish narratives such as the Tom Mix films, or boxing matches he had seen in the movies. Steinberg had to construct the Jewish persecution narrative as he experienced it; learning along the way what it meant to be a Jew.

Further evidence of the void of substance in his Jewishness is made explicit in the very beginning of his story, when he reveals his dismay at perhaps being "the only uncircumcised Jew in the whole of France to be deported to Auschwitz" (12). He was so lacking in knowledge that he was not even aware of circumcision, something he would encounter in his first group shower in Auschwitz III-Monowitz. He reflects that he "didn't know a thing about circumcision or about the Jewish religion in general. [His] father had neglected, through prudery, no doubt, to discuss this captivating subject" (12).

While Joffo found peace in his identity, and a substance to his "negative" picture of Jewishness, Steinberg continued to grapple with his identity and is noticeably troubled by it, presumably until his death in 1999. He gives himself a proverbial "pat on the back" for having lived through the horrors of Auschwitz, yet he is uncomfortable with his identity as a survivor.

His childhood may have prepared him for survival in the camp, but it seems to have left him ill equipped for life *after* the *Shoah* when he must continually question why he survived.

Unlike Steinberg, whose vagabond like childhood prepared him to excel in the concentrationary universe, our third author, Charlotte Delbo, struggled with the rupture in her access to collective memory. As a chronic loner and migrant, Steinberg was accustomed to the feeling of wandering, not fitting in anywhere, and having no primary identity (collective memory) upon which to draw. Delbo, however, was ardently proud of the *République* and fought to uphold its cause as a member of the Résistance. Her previous notion of *Francité* had been inclusive, and her selective choice of what constitutes Frenchness does not include Morris-Reich's "specific difference." It is this inability (or discomfort) in associating a distinct identity to Jews which makes her struggle with her own Frenchness.

Her text, a trilogy under the title *Auschitz et Après (Auschwitz and After)*, is a reflection upon her experiences of the Nazi death machinery which consumed so many of her comrades. Throughout its pages Delbo recounts the struggle to survive in the camp, the need to escape and compartmentalize the horrors she encounters, and a catalogue of the people alongside of whom she suffered. Through her experience of the *Shoah*, Delbo is slowly stripped of her former self, forced to reconstruct a new French and self identity, in light of her new knowledge.

Delbo marks a turning point in our study, being the first non-Jewish survivor author to be explored. It may seem odd to look to a non-Jewish text for insight on Jewish identity, but it is, in fact, essential to a full understanding of the discourse we have constructed. Delbo represents the other side of the identity struggle: the individual who feels herself to be *fully* French, and feels that her suffering comes from this Frenchness rather than an imposed identity outside of her comfort zone.

In an encounter with a French Jewess, quite early in the narrative, Delbo poignantly elaborates on the separation that was felt by the Jews of France. Recalling our earlier analysis of the commitment to a “continued common life,” coming from Renan’s revolutionary concept of nationhood, Delbo shows us the gap that is created when the life is no longer common, and a commitment cannot be shared.

“You’re French?”

“Yes”

“So am I.”

She has no F on her chest. A star.

“From where?”

“Paris.”

“You’ve been here a long time?”

“Five weeks.”

“I’ve been here sixteen days.”

“That’s already a long time, I know.”

“Five weeks...How can it be?”

“Just like this.”

“And *you* think *we* can survive this?”

She is begging.

“We’ve got to try.”

“For you perhaps there’s hope, but for us...”

She points to my striped jacket and then to her coat, a coat much too big, much too dirty, much too tattered.

“Oh, come on, it’s the same odds for both of *us*.”

“For *us*, there’s no hope.”

She gestures with her hand, mimics rising smoke.

“We’ve got to keep up our courage.”

“Why bother...Why keep on struggling when all of *us* are to...”

The gesture of her hand completes her sentence. Rising smoke.

(Delbo 15, emphasis mine)

It is no longer a game of equal partnership. In only sixteen days of suffering, the Jewess has lost the hope that Delbo has held onto for five weeks. The mental destruction that has been perpetrated against the Jewess is deeper than that of Delbo, deep enough to strip her of all optimism. The events of the *Shoah*, both in and out of the camps, have divided those who find

themselves under German rule. What was before the shared suffering of compatriots, is now a comparison of “you” and “us”.

Delbo, not suffering through the same plight as the Jews, can still afford to collectivize herself with this Jewess. She still uses “we,” the collective “we” that incorporates all Frenchmen suffering under the Germans. However, when the Jewess asks if Delbo thinks “we can survive this,” Delbo confuses the “we” she is using as this collectivity, something that refers to both of them. The begging that the Jewess is doing is not for an affirmative response to both of their fates, but, rather to hear that Delbo thinks the *Jews* will live through this attack.

Delbo repeats this mistake later when stating that “We’ve got to keep up our courage”, an invitation to the Jewess to rejoin the collective. The Jewess declines, reverting instead to “us,” and the sad knowledge that “all of *us* are to...” end in rising smoke. The Jewess has effectively become a Frenchwoman apart, part of a collective within a collective. Though she tells Delbo that she too is French, the absence of the F on her chest shows where her primary identity must lie: with the other wearers of the star, the other women who share her fate.

Before the early 1980s, not much work was being done on the uniqueness of the Jewish experience in France before and during the *Shoah*. This can be largely attributed to a continued desire by French historians to maintain the singular collective French view of history, rather than a multiplicity of experiences. Though not Jewish herself, Charlotte Delbo rejected this impulse and chose instead to leave little doubt as to the primary victim of the *Shoah*. In the opening pages of her work *Aucun de Nous ne Reviendra* (“None of us Will Return,” the first book in the trilogy), Delbo pays subtle tribute to the sufferings of the Jews:

You who have wept two thousand years
for one who agonized for three days and three nights
what tears will you have left
for those who agonized

far more than three hundred nights and far more than three hundred days...

...They did not believe in resurrection to eternal life
and knew you would not weep. (Delbo 10)

The dichotomy is clear. Christians and Jews do not share the same place in this world, especially in this perversely distorted world of the *Shoah*. Though her own religious leanings are not expressed in her memoir, it seems very clear that those who “did not believe” are not just ordinary prisoners like herself, but Jews. The despair that seeps from this poem spreads out into other depictions of Jews in the narrative who share this lack of hope for redemption and empathy from others.

With the introduction to her work taking the form of this prose poem, Delbo is entering into a dialogue which she will maintain throughout. It is a sort of commentary on the lack of Jewish voices in the discussion of the Shoah. The dominance of gentile voices in *Shoah* studies (particularly in France) could be clearly seen in public figures like Francois Mauriac²², the man who introduced Elie Wiesel to the French speaking world. His foreword to Wiesel’s 1958 *La Nuit* typifies the impulse of many non-Survivors to “Christianize” the *Shoah*, or, in Bernard Suchocky’s view, their attempts to transform Auschwitz “into a ‘symbol of the sacrifice accomplished with Christ’” (Suchocky 162). When Delbo addresses her narrative to “You who have wept” for a man who is obviously Jesus, she is challenging people like Mauriac to see the truth; to recognize the distinct character of Jewish suffering as completely independent of Christian theology.

²² As the author of the foreword to the French edition of Wiesel’s *La Nuit*, Mauriac has subsequently been translated and included in other versions of Wiesel’s text. In this preface, Mauriac uses distinctly Christian imagery, and, in the end, makes remarks that border on evangelism. A commentary on this foreword can be found in Naomi Seidman’s “Elie Wiesel and the Scandal of Jewish Rage” in *Jewish Social Studies* (Dec. 1996)

On the opposite end of the spectrum lies our fourth and final author. Considered one of the earliest and most comprehensive survivor historians, David Rousset left no stone unturned in his analysis of what he called the “concentrationary universe.” In his novel of the same name (*l’Univers Concentrationnaire*, in the original French), Rousset gives an strikingly unbiased and perceptive catalogue of life under the Nazi machine. As a political prisoner interned at Buchenwald, Rousset was no stranger to the harshness of life in the camps, and his portraits of both persecutors and prisoners alike shed light on the incomprehensible. Long stretches of text are given over to describing minute details of the absurdities of camp life. Almost every national group is discussed at length, with full descriptions of their behavior, position in the hierarchy of power, and approach to survival in the camp. Yet there is a large gap in his report – the Jews.

Unlike Delbo, whose experience taught her the realities of Jewish exclusion, Rousset remained ignorant of and resistant to Morris-Reich’s “specific difference.” Though the awareness of Jewish specificity in the *Shoah* was not prevalent in his time (particularly in his native country of France as discussed earlier), the lack of descriptions of any Jews in the camp is still striking. In fact, the word “Jew” is used fewer than five times throughout the entirety of his 173 page work.

In those few occasions of usage, “Jew” is only spoken of in terms of an abstract group, with no indication of their placement in the hierarchy, their behavior in the camps, or even a single portrait of their membership. The most detailed account of the plight of the Jews of the camp occurs when, grouping them with Russians and Poles, he describes them as being:

“the static expression of evil...by birth, by predestination, a non-assimilable heretic doomed to hell-fire. Death therefore is not enough. Only expiation can assuage and soothe the Master Race.” (Rousset 109)

Rousset, the meticulous witness of the atrocities around him, whose unflinching eye categorized and catalogued every event around him, had failed to see the blatantly obvious genocide occurring in the camps. In his appraisal, Jews were no different than Poles, or Russians; they were just one more unsavory bunch that threatened to derail National Socialism.

The gaping hole in his depictions of the Jews of the camp could be due in large part to his discomfort in expressing what he saw as the *imagined* collectivity of Jews. He was raised in a system that instilled in him the belief that Jews, like any other religious group, were just ordinary citizens. They were not an entity apart, they could not be definable as different from any other Frenchmen, and they certainly were not the “un-assimilable” sub-humans that the Germans believed them to be. After all, one hundred and fifty years of history taught him differently. Rousset was deeply rooted in the French collective memory, his conception of which, similar to Delbo’s, did not promote the exclusion of Jews. It seems no great coincidence, then, that both of them, as resistance fighters, would struggle the introduction of individual identities precluding membership in the French *République*.

His failure to see the importance of Jewishness in the Nazi attitude toward its victims stretches deeper into his narrative, into his depiction of fellow inmates. Benjamin Crémieux, a world renowned Proust scholar, and fellow Frenchman, was taking a rest from his assigned labor in Rousset’s barrack when the camp police entered. Rousset describes the scene in a chapter devoted to Benjamin, which he titles “I Have Made my Bed in the Darkness” (Rousset 78):

“The Police had just entered the block. We were in barrack 61 at Buchenwald at the time. For ten days, most of us, wearing the blue striped uniforms, had been waiting for our travel orders. At the far end of the room, slumped in a huddle at the last table, as usual, sat Benjamin Crémieux. I threaded my way down the barracks to warn him. He had no right to be there. He should have been out in the forest chopping wood. The police might take it into their heads to make a checkup, in which case, it meant the whip for Crémieux. He

straightened his stooped back a little; his bewildered face harbored a momentary look of protest.” (Rousset 78-79)

Not once in the entire chapter devoted to Crémieux does Rousset give us the vital detail of his identity. Crémieux is a well known French Jewish surname, with many famous Jewish intellectuals amongst their number. Benjamin Crémieux is among them; a Jew who actually went as far as defending himself and his fellow Jews in a 1942 publication denouncing Vichy anti-Semitism²³. Rousset later tells us that he and Crémieux arrived in the same transport, and spent a month together in the same room upon arrival. Doubtlessly, Rousset knew of Crémieux’s Jewishness (if the surname alone hadn’t already given him away), yet he fails to mention it in his description.

I suspect that Rousset’s upbringing in the French nationalist environment affected this decision. Rousset had come from a world where Jews were not an entity, and a single Frenchman was never considered “a Jew,” at least in a way that decreased his identification as “French.” Thus, even the gentile French population had difficulty in accepting the Jews reassigned personas. Though I hesitate to make even the smallest comparison between the trauma experienced by the Jew and that of the gentile, it is evident in Rousset’s description that he is also having trouble coming to terms with the rejection of the French ideals, the French inclusive vocabulary.

This same dilemma, which Delbo resolves in her text, is left unacknowledged in Rousset. He cannot come to terms with the new rules of identification, and, rather than recognize the struggle, he ignores it completely. Delbo narrates her awareness of the shifting paradigms of identity, while Rousset leaves the reader to pick up on small details and fill in the gaps. Perhaps,

²³ Crémieux, along with comrade René Milhaud, published a manifesto against the blatant anti-Semitism of the Vichy Government. For more on the political writings of Benjamin Cremieux, see A. Eustis’ *Marcel Arland, Benjamin Crémieux, Ramon Fernandez, Trois Critiques de la Nouvelle Revue Française*, 1961)

because of the relatively early construction, Rousset was not yet aware of the importance that the Jewish experience would take on.

Rousset also takes a step away from Crémieux in the way he describes himself in this chapter. Rousset refers to “most of us, wearing the blue striped uniforms” (Rousset 78). Rousset’s talk of “us” only one sentence before the introduction of Crémieux makes it clear that Crémieux is by default the “other,” the excluded, and the outsider. He sets up the same sort of division that the Jewess speaking with Delbo constructed. Whether intentional or not, Rousset’s insistence that “He had no right to be there” (79) makes his position even clearer. Crémieux suffers completely separated from the rest, no longer sharing the commonalities that are crucial to the French conception of Nation (as defined by Renan).

Though Rousset does not give us the factors that contribute to Crémieux’s dejection, a perceptive reader can see the same Jewish despair reflected in his behavior, that Charlotte Delbo attributed to the Jewess in Auschwitz. Rousset tells us that Crémieux

“spent hours sitting on his bench, the last one next to the door, stooped, elbows on the table, hands clasped behind his head, fighting with all his determination to keep alive. It tired him to talk. Yet at times he endowed some anecdote, some passing word, with life; a movement of his hand evoked a silhouette and gave shape to an entire world that must once have been...

...One day he talked to us about all the books he had bought and the plans that he had made to write a comparative history of the literature of the period between the two wars. He spoke in a low voice, but his whole torso stirred with animation. For us, his friends from Marseille and me, it was like watching a dream construct itself, tenacious and living, by sheer will...

...“It isn’t possible,” he said, and with upraised palms took us to witness, as if incapable of understanding that reason was no longer enough. Then he got up and, stoop-shouldered, with that nervous shuffle that characterized him, made his way to his bunk and painfully climbed into it.” (Rousset 79-80)

Rousset speaks of Crémieux as a sort of ghost of a man, who occasionally grants the “silhouette” of a world that once was but is no longer. Crémieux embodies the struggle within the victim, the hope against hope that he will survive his imprisonment and resume his life outside, only to

realize that “It isn’t possible.” The despair has so deeply permeated his being that Crémieux even walks with dejection, stoop shouldered, tired from simply talking, fighting to survive.

The political prisoners around him can maintain hope, knowing that their place in this nightmare is only caused by a disagreement with those in power *now*. Crémieux, however, as a Jew, must accept that his place in the camps is not caused by a passing political fad but is rather something within him that cannot be changed; that will never be “in fashion” even once the war is over—if he is able to survive until then.

Lying just below the surface of Rousset’s depiction is an awareness of the unique struggle that Jews in the camps are facing, yet it remains hidden and unacknowledged. Unlike Delbo, who is explicit in her recognition of Morris-Reich’s “specific difference,” Rousset maintains the inclusive view of Frenchness; effectively denying Crémieux his identity as a victim apart. Whereas Delbo accepted the need to revise her conception of *Francité*, Rousset insists upon a continuation of the ideals of the *République*.

The multiplicity of responses shown by each of our narratives (and their narrators) represent merely four aspects of a polymorphic entity. The continuous flow between representational forms (which are not static themselves) reveals the complexity of the issue. From the positive responses of Joffo and Delbo, to the negative resistance of Steinberg and Rousset, the effect of the *Shoah* on Jewish identity (and the perception of Jewish identity) is something that can only partially be pinned down.

In truth, our efforts to categorize and analyze the respective narrators is antithetical to this reality; for, the moment we analyze them, we crystallize their identity without allowing for future change. In truth, these reflections upon a few published (and therefore highly constructed)

portraits of Jewish identity open a window on an entire field of study, and look forward to the reactions of each successive reading and retelling of history.

4.0 LEARNING TO (RE)LIVE AGAIN

The Continued Impact of the *Shoah* on French Jewish Identity

A look at a few of the many voices that comprise the French *Shoah* canon reveals a small glimpse into an incredibly diverse and complex world. The evolution of identity through time and culture was by no means finished after the *Shoah*. The impact of “the Catastrophe” continues to be felt like shock waves that ripple after the bomb has fallen. We have previously attempted to show how the *Shoah* affects the identity (and subsequent narration of identity) of survivors, yet little has been said about our generation: the inheritors of the *Shoah* and a new collective memory.

The field of Post-Memory, which explores the impact of an event through the eyes of subsequent generations, has much to reveal about the continued presence of the *Shoah*. As readers continue to interact with the writings of survivors, and documentaries continue to be produced, a new picture of the event emerges. The *Shoah*, even for those who experienced it first-hand, is an evolving memory. This became evident in our exploration of Steinberg, who, despite having lived through the event personally, feels the effect of other survivor accounts. How much more so can we talk about the plasticity of memory for those who, like ourselves, *did not* experience it, but rather received it second-hand through testimony.

We have already mentioned the ways that Jews and non-Jews contemporaneously drew upon the collective memories of France and Jewishness, and, a natural next step is to consider

the ways in which these collective memories have changed, leading a new generation to compose their identities from this evolving collective memory. Just as Joseph Joffo inherited the memory of persecution from his father and grandfather, the Jew of today inherits the memory of the *Shoah* from survivors, particularly survivor authors.

In this way, individuals must come to terms with each new development. Survivors are both a product of and the arbiters of a new collective memory. One which is shaped by their experience of the *Shoah*, and which continues to morph as more and more survivors add to the conception of it. For the non-survivor reader, the event continues to evolve further; as our generation both reflects upon and creates new conceptions of the event. The *Shoah* is not a static event precisely *because* of the evolutions it undergoes in its retelling.

The individual is a product not only of the event itself, but also of the recollections of said event, and the conception of the event formed by the society in which we find ourselves. This dizzying process of construction and reconstruction composes a new collective memory (or perhaps forms an addition to previous collectivities) which are drawn upon in the formation of our own identities today. Henri Raczymow speaks of this particular phenomenon in France, concluding that:

“those born in France, especially the third generation looking back to the vanished world of their grandparents, also mythologize the past, but they do so unconsciously. We are submerged in mythology, and in their case, even their nostalgia is mythical, for it is for something that they never knew, that no longer exists and that will never again exist. Their nostalgia is devoid of content...”
(Raczymow 101)

Scholar James Young speaks about this same issue in his work on second generation *Shoah* memorials. Noting that it is utterly impossible for non-survivors to “remember” the *Shoah*, he suggests that they must instead rely vicariously on the memories of others, the

representations of which become a substitute for the memory itself (Young 2-3). Effectively, the survivors are actively shaping the collective memories by their narration of it. Moving even further from this transmission, the next generation continues to produce representations of the *Shoah*, changing the collective memory yet again. A Jew born in our time is a product not only of history, but of the successive commentaries on and constructions of that history which have been produced and continue to be produced.

For French Jews, to be a Jew today means having inherited the memory not only of the round up of their ancestors in Drancy, the deportations to Auschwitz, or the active participation of the Vichy government, but also the writings of Joffo, Rousset, Steinberg, and Delbo, amongst others. The ultimate representation of this interchange can be seen in the documentary film by Claude Lanzmann, *SHOAH*. The film and subsequent responses perfectly display the ways in which modern Jewish identity is built not upon the ruins of Auschwitz, but rather upon the memory of those who experienced it.

SHOAH is the final product of extensive filming and interviews which depict the Nazi destruction of the Jews. In all of its nine and a half hours, not a single piece of archival footage, photography, or testimony is used. It is entirely composed of contemporary landscape, and interview footage collected by Lanzmann. In choosing to portray the experience without the aid of actual footage, Lanzmann is making a statement; he is denying the necessity of cold hard fact in favor of recounted experiences. Or as Henry Rousso suggests in his review,

Ce fut aussi pour certains l'occasion de réaliser que les sources de l'histoire du temps présent ne se limitent pas aux sacro-saintes archives de papier pelure, mais peuvent prendre les formes le plus diverses, comme ici le témoignage filmé. (Rousso 113)

It is also, for some, a chance to realize that the sources of the history of present times is not limited to the sacrosanct India-paper archives, but can take the most diverse of forms, such as here in the form of filmed testimony.

Though it was not his intention to create a representational history of the *Shoah*, I would suggest that his end result goes beyond this to include a commentary on the ways that modern notions of history are composed. By choosing to rely solely on the testimony, he is commenting on the fact that our modern notion of the event is shaped almost exclusively by these testimonies. The superimposition of modern landscape while the survivor testimony is heard, merges the two in the viewers' minds, forcing identification of the place with the story.

Further evidence of his intentions is revealed in his choice of title. Effectively, in calling this collection of interviews *SHOAH*, rather than a derivative thereof (such as *Commentaire sur...* or *Les Survivants de...* etc.) he is alluding to an increased link between the body (being his film) and the event itself. I am not suggesting that Lanzmann sees his work to be as significant or as pivotal as *the Shoah*, but he certainly makes claims as to the scope of his representation, whether intentional or not²⁴. His title suggests to the viewer that his portrayal is *complete enough* to give an accurate account of the event (à la James Young 2-3).

The construction of the film continues in this concept of representation and experience (as referenced earlier in his use of no archival footage). Lanzmann uses several techniques, such as the juxtaposition of a story with, for lack of a better term, a “contemporary reenactment.” Take, for example, the story of Abraham Bomba, a scene which particularly interests Dominic LaCapra in his critical commentary “Lanzmann’s *Shoah*: “Here There Is No Why.”

Rather than simply filming Abraham talking about his experiences as a barber in Treblinka, Lanzmann films him cutting a customer’s hair in a barbershop. This vivid link

²⁴ Lanzmann made several comments about the intended form of his work, some of which are contradictory to passages of the film, or subtitles to editions of the film. He claimed that his work was not to be viewed as history, nor even as a documentary, but merely as a film and a “fiction of the real.” I fully agree with Dominic LaCapra in his suggestion that Lanzmann exceeded his “self-understanding,” and had much more of an impact of notions of “fact” and “history” than his intentions would suggest. For more on this interplay, see Dominic LaCapra, “Lanzmann’s *Shoah*: Here There Is No Why,” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 23, No. 2, (Winter, 1997), pp. 231-269.

between the present and the past can be a bit jarring, giving visual proof that the *Shoah* still impacts Bomba today. Yet, in reality, the scene takes place in a barbershop where Abraham has never worked, in front of a cast of hired extras who do not even understand the language he is speaking. Lanzmann's staging of this scene reveals his own awareness of the extreme mediation through which this story must exist. We, as non-survivors, can only glimpse at the event; Bomba's words and actions seek to create a window through an unbridgeable gap of time and experience.

In choosing to film a present which reflects the past, Lanzmann suggests a concrete link between the two; making the past events in Treblinka as real for the viewer as the present day. The reality of the scene (that it is entirely staged and constructed) is not important, since it is the reaction and impact that he is seeking. Lanzmann comments on this mediation and resultant concept of the *Shoah* in his essay *De l'holocauste à Holocauste*, where he states:

The worst crime, simultaneously moral and artistic, that can be committed when it is a question of realizing a work dedicated to the Holocaust is to consider the latter as *past*. The Holocaust is either legend or present. It is in no case of the order of memory. A film consecrated to the Holocaust can only be a countermyth, that is, *an inquiry into the present of the Holocaust or at the very least into a past whose scars are still so freshly and vividly inscribed in places and in consciences that it gives itself to be seen in a hallucinatory intemporality*. (As cited in LaCapra, 240. Trans. LaCapra, emphasis mine)

Lanzmann sees the *Shoah* as being something which cannot be relegated to the past, but rather experienced in the present. What Young talks of as vicariously remembering the past, Lanzmann is actively constructing with his film.

The discourse of modern Jewish collective memory, as shown by *SHOAH* becomes a dialectic exchange between the past, present, and recollections which often slide between the two. The modern notion of Jewish identity becomes a dialogue with, and between texts. Implicit in this dialogue is the introduction of new voices, ones who have not been privy to the

original event, such as the work of Claude Lanzmann, and others. Next generation Jews and non-Jews are putting forth their words (analytical and creative) to further expand the body of work, and as a result affect the composition of the collective memory of the *Shoah*.

The authors explored in this work, who are in no ways representative of the entire canon, present merely four examples of this dialogue. The exchange between survivor narrators, their readers, and society presents new avenues for expression, new sources for identity construction, but mainly, new questions to be explored. The historical overview presented in this analysis suggests that the *Shoah* is of pivotal importance in Jewish history. The literary analysis explored only four examples of this importance, leaving room for expansion and reflection in the future, but nonetheless strongly suggesting that our modern understanding of Jewishness is and will continue to be deeply rooted in the *Shoah*.

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