

A French representation of the Holocaust, as illustrated by the Mémorial de la Shoah, Paris

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My paper is to be placed in parallel to the one by Claude Singer dealing with the ages of memory in France since 1945. As a matter of fact, to deal with the representation of the Shoah as illustrated by the *Mémorial de la Shoah* means also to describe the history of this memory in France.

In few words, what is the history of the *Mémorial de la Shoah*? One has first to know that, of course, it was not called *Mémorial de la Shoah* from its beginnings. Created in 1943, in the Italian occupied zone of France, in Grenoble, its first name was *Centre de documentation juive contemporaine*: its main aim, as put by its founder, Isaac Schneerson, was to collect archives in order later to raise claims. Once back in Paris, in 1945, the objective remained the same, with then the possibility also to collect German papers that were left in Paris ; not only the archives were collected, they were also used for first – not really completely scientific – studies by the historians who had joined Schneerson, meaning Josef Billig and Léon Poliakov. In 1953 was erected the *Tombeau du martyr juif inconnu*, with the laying of the cornerstone of a monument inaugurated in 1956, that was to be located on the very same place than the CDJC (and that became the *Mémorial du Martyr Juif inconnu* in 1974). In the crypt, below the *Tombeau*, ashes stemming from extermination camps were laid in 1957. Being restructured a first time at the beginning of the 1990's, the whole was closed and renewed by the beginning of the years 2000, with a new opening as *Mémorial de la Shoah* in 2005.

The functions of the institution reflect some varying representations of the Holocaust. At the very beginning, we should note that the institution was not thought as a reflection of the catastrophe. The point was the reconstruction of a Jewish life in France, with efforts by the Documentation Centre not so much to document the destruction as to document and motivate the claims towards reparations/restitutions: the CDJC had to centralise the claims, besides collecting archival material justifying

them. A first representation of the Holocaust appeared some little time later, with the first use of the collected archival material, firstly by “simply” describing and publishing important documents; then by establishing real scientific studies that were not a classical chronic of the misfortunes endured by the Jews like what was the case before. The commemoration, a kind of sacralised representation of the Holocaust came only afterwards: the point was then to disseminate the conscience and the knowledge on the Holocaust to larger circles, since the publications that were produced by the *CDJC* could only reach historians or specialised circles. Following this preoccupation, it was decided to erect a monument in order to establish a concrete illustration of the Holocaust, at least of its memory, and in order to popularise a topic until then limited to some circles. Such a monument devoted to the Holocaust was as such quite new within the world of the era (one should have in mind that at this moment there was no *Yad Vashem*; as a matter of fact, the Israeli institution was created only as a reaction to the French institution). Such a monument was also as such quite revolutionary, since it broke the Jewish tradition: for this the idea was not easily accepted among the French Jews, among the other Jews of the world. Such a monument reflected indeed more a French, lay and republican tradition, originating in the monument to the Unknown Soldier, below the Arc de triomphe.

In the same time the monument the people of the *CDJC* had in mind constituted a rupture with the French consensus: as such this was a first representation of a different memory, of different dramas that affected specifically a certain group of population within the French nation, meaning the Jews: until then, it was accepted in France, like elsewhere, that WWII had had people suffering without any specific distinction between the victims. From then, we have two different monuments in Paris: one for the victims of political deportation on the *Ile de la Cité* in Paris (decided in 1953, inaugurated in 1962); and one for the Jewish victims, in the rue Geoffroy l’Asnier, also in Paris.

Regardless, the efforts made by the architects of the 1956 inaugurated *Tombeau du martyr juif inconnu* were to somewhat soften the message. As a matter of fact the monument had to remember the Holocaust, but no aggressive stand had to appear: and indeed the style that was chosen was (and still is) quite modest, with a building being erected in the very centre of historical Paris.

The passage to the new dimension illustrates also a somewhat modified message: the CDJC was not only a documentation centre anymore; it was also, and at least in appearance, becoming more a place of commemoration, not to speak of mourning, which was strengthened by the very mention of the martyrdom of the Jews of France.

The dimensions remained for some decades, until the developments of the 1990's and of the past decade, with a kind of coming back to the origins. The appearance was preserved (the building is placed on the list of the French national trust); but beyond the façade many things changed. This was the result of an acceleration of the French (and European) debate on the Holocaust during the 1990's; this was also the result of the creation of the *Fondation pour la Mémoire de la Shoah*, 2000-2001, with rather new possibilities of development thanks to new fundings.

The evolution conducted to the new opening, in January 2005, Jacques Chirac and Simone Veil presiding the ceremony on 25th January; the new building being opened to the public on 27th January, sixtieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz.

As such, the new *Mémorial de la Shoah* does in fact look like many other memorials of the kind throughout the world: as such, it is now part of the "Global Rush to commemorate Atrocities" (Paul Williams). One should not forget that the current situation is quite different to the one of the beginnings, when the *Tombeau* was created as the first and unique memorial in the world.

As for now, the *Mémorial de la Shoah* is fully integrated in French social and historical life, reflecting the well accepted fact of the specific dimensions of the Holocaust now taking place in France: it is definitely not a communitarian – Jewish - institution, it's an integrated part of the French memory of WWII. This was not quite simple, but is now well settled, as shown by the debates on the so called "Jewish files" rediscovered by Serge Klarsfeld, part of the French National Archive, now deposited at the *Mémorial* as part of the exhibition like of the commemorative section.

The *Mémorial de la Shoah* as a whole, in its current state, illustrates the evolution of the French representation of the Holocaust, under the auspices of leading personalities, politicians or historians.

It considers indeed the event more and more as a whole, offering in parallel some intimate perceptions. This may be illustrated through the fact that only few authentic artefacts are shown in the permanent exhibition, as if it was now necessary to reduce the quantity of “reliques” that should be presented to the public.

A. The Shoah, the Holocaust as a whole, in its entire, European dimensions

This appears through the permanent and the provisional exhibitions settled at the *Mémorial*, through the architecture, the public lectures, like through the pedagogical offer taking place there or via the Internet homepage of the institution. We here have for instance lectures or exhibitions, often linked to global commemorations (currently for instance dealing with the so called *Reichskristallnacht*). The events constitute always a possibility to have the audience, the public rediscovering – astonishingly also discovering – some aspects of the Holocaust that apparently needed to be refreshed in French minds. This is particularly the case of the exhibition devoted to the activities of a French catholic priest, willing since few years to locate the sites where Eastern European Jews have been exterminated by the *Einsatzgruppen*, especially in Ukraine. The programme has been marked in France by an interesting – to say the least – phenomenon, French people (and maybe also the priest himself) discovering that the Holocaust, before being industrially conducted in the death camps, had been characterised by “classical” massacres, people being killed with “classical” bullets and machine guns. The exhibition “revealed” some very known aspects of the Shoah, not only known to the specialists, that had been (really?) forgotten in France: thanks to the exhibition, the Shoah as a whole was again represented. As for them, French Jews, better: Jews from France, having been largely killed in the camps, and not by *Einsatzgruppen*.

By doing this, the *Mémorial de la Shoah* helps providing a larger audience a more complete appearance of the Holocaust, re-establishing its real, European dimension. This is also the case of the pedagogical activities, like the “summer courses” taking place since some years, with nowadays complementary teaching organised each year in Poland. The global representation of the Holocaust is also illustrated through the publications produced by the *CDJC-Mémorial de la Shoah*: nowadays its periodical called *Revue d'histoire de la Shoah* (having been first entitled *Le Monde juif*) offers a large range of thematical issues, devoted to the Shoah in

general (meaning not only its very French sides), also replacing the Holocaust into its larger context (other mass violences, other genocides...).

B. The Shoah illustrated by individual fates

Beside the global representation of the Holocaust, the current *Mémorial de la Shoah* offers also an individuation of the catastrophe. An obvious proof of this aspect is eloquently presented by the so-called “Mur des noms” (inaugurated on 25 January 2005): presenting on Jerusalem stone the names of the 76 000 Jews deported from France, the wall presents a very personal dimension of the Holocaust, and one is due to go “through” the names in order to enter the *Mémorial*; and the wall has become something like a trademark, regularly used on pictures in the French newspapers – the way people express their prayers is by the way not very Jewish, since very Christian candles are deposited on the soil, facing the wall; this is also illustrated by the ceremony taking place each *Yom haShoah*, when the names are read publically, a ceremony taking place between the wall and the shrine facing the building.

The individuation is the result of the action of Dr. Serge Klarsfeld, whose vocation was (and still is) to reconstitute each individual fate: this is what he did through his numerous publications; this is what we now have through the hall of the children, with the pictures taken out of the *Mémorial des enfants juifs déportés de France* he publishes since 1994.

The individuation as main representation of the Holocaust appears now also, since 14 June 2006, through the wall of the Righteous, listing the 2 000 and so French Righteous. The construction of such a symbol and its presence beside the *Mémorial de la Shoah*, creates the impression of a kind of “Shoah campus” in the middle of Paris; it illustrates also a French wish to have a kind of balance and to respect the reality of the numerous rescues that have taken place in France during WWII: beyond the wall, one should remember that the French Righteous entered the Panthéon in January 2007, in a very symbolic gesture co-organised by the French Republic and parts of the French Jewish community, ending a cycle that began in 1995 under the auspices of Président Chirac. Short, this takes part in the French process of “mastering the past”.

Nevertheless, the historical and memorial representation of the Shoah has not come to its end: in a symbolic way, one should note that there is still room to add

names on both walls. Anyway, the *Mémorial de la Shoah*, with all the symbols it hosts, is definitely a long lasting building and representation of the Holocaust downtown Paris, a “place of memory” that definitely entered French history and that helps remembering the drama beside the still very living Jewish “places of life” established in the Marais neighbourhood (also incarnated by the Jewish art and history Museum).

Since its reopening in 2005, the *Mémorial de la Shoah* has definitely gone out of the kind of amateurism that has prevailed before (as shown through the library and the periodical, at times rather non scientific). The Holocaust, the representation of the Shoah that it illustrates has now become a kind of “great French question of concern”, with from time to time a risk to be overestimated in the French debates (with criticism coming from the other former deportees). The affirmation on the French – and European – scene also illustrates a wish to be recognised as an equivalent to the other big Memorials (Jerusalem and Washington), in a quest to regain the initiative it was a symbol of at its very beginnings. On the French stage, the *Mémorial* incarnates indeed the representation of the Shoah; nevertheless, this has only to deal with documentation (archives, library and photographic collection), the commemoration and the education (training and organisation of “memory trips” mainly to Auschwitz, where, once again, most of the Jews from France who have been deported have been killed); in a very specific French distinction, beside no official “Holocaust Studies” in France, no academic research is undertaken there (the *Revue d’histoire de la Shoah* publishes only external papers, no researcher as such permanently works at the *Mémorial*)

All in all, the *Mémorial de la Shoah* today represents the Holocaust / the Shoah under its different aspects towards an audience that has experienced neither the Holocaust nor WWII; the *Mémorial de la Shoah* wants to show and to remember the Holocaust, with a specific attention to the time when the witnesses won’t live any more: their testimonies are recorded, they are present throughout the permanent exhibition, but one is now ready for the time after.

Like in the last writings of Saul Friedländer, in the representation of the Holocaust, the language of the perpetrators has been replaced by the language of the victims. The so-called “Final Solution” has been replaced by the “Shoah”, in a

way to show, describe and perpetuate the memory of the catastrophe. This is what we now have in the very name of the institution.