

## The Perception of the Shoah in France after 1945

In sixty years the perception of the Shoah has evolved considerably in France. Absent at first from the mental universe of the French, then for a long time marginal, in recent years this perception has become clearer, more central and almost inescapable. Indeed not a day passes without a new publication on this theme, without the placing of a commemorative plaque on a school, or the projection of a new film on this subject. And, as the historian Saul Friedlander stressed in the 1980s, interest and emotion concerning the Shoah, far from waning, have tended to become stronger with time. One also observes this phenomenon in North America, in several other European countries and obviously in Israel, but it is France which concerns us today.

To understand how such a radical change of perspective took place over a period of more than sixty years, we will first try to show the principal stages of the perception of the Shoah in France since 1945. We will then examine several principal vectors of this change, notably education, legal trials and artistic creation. Finally, we will stress the involvement of the Jews of France in this evolution.

I. The perception: three principal stages from 1945-2008 A. 1945-46 The Shock The first, quite short, phase corresponds primarily to the shock in France immediately after the war at the discovery of the genocide of the Jews. In point of fact, one should speak more of the discovery of the crimes of the Nazis than of the genocide of the Jews. Indeed, in the spring of 1945, when French public opinion discovered with horror the first images (photographs and films) of the opening of the camps, the piled up corpses. and the catastrophic state of the survivors, the specific fate of the Jews was still poorly grasped.

The Jews are simply part of the shapeless magma of the victims of Nazi Germany but their specific fate does not emerge at all. The Jewish victims are not denied, they are sometimes even mentioned explicitly in the press, in newsreels or historic exhibitions, but they remain, as during the war years, submerged among the other categories of victims of "Nazi barbarity": military prisoners, forced laborers, Resistance fighters...

Moreover, the first large exhibit dedicated to "Hitlerian crimes", organized in Paris in June 1945 at the Grand Palais, allocates only a very small part to the Jews. Indeed, among the 27 sections of this exhibit, only one is devoted to the Jews. This is the 19th, flanked by a section evoking the Milice of Vichy (the 18th) and another on political prisoners (the 20th). In these conditions, how could the visitors to this exhibit clearly grasp the genocide of the Jews? The predominant idea is that the Jews, when all is said and done, constitute only one group of victims among so many others.

This type of confusion is found moreover in the vocabulary of the era since the deliberately neutral expression of "political deportees" is generally used to designate the victims of Nazism. This expression does not allow one to distinguish the Jews from the other categories of persecuted victims. The even more ambiguous expression "death camps", used frequently at the time to designate concentration camps like Dachau, Buchenwald or Bergen-Belsen, also does not help one to understand that the Jews were systematically put to death in camps like Auschwitz, Treblinka,, Maidanek... In France, just after the Liberation, there is no clear distinction made between the various categories of deportees (workers, opponents, Jews...) A poster of the MNPG (National Movement of Prisoners of War and Deportees) which represents diverse categories of deportees (one of whom wears

the striped uniform of the "political") moreover proclaims explicitly: "They are united. Do not divide them".

There is no possible question at this time of distinguishing between camps for prisoners, deportees and Jews. Auschwitz continues to be perceived as a concentration camp, doubtless very harsh, but in sum, a camp among so many others. In any case it is not systematically associated with the genocide of the Jews as is the case today. It is difficult, indeed impossible, in these conditions, despite the often very precise testimonies (oral or written) of survivors, to grasp the totality of the process of extermination of the Jews set in place by the Nazi regime in Europe. The lack of information, the absence of an audience and the faint interest shown in this subject by public opinion moreover quickly drove many survivors to take refuge in silence. For the latter, closing the "parentheses" of the war years was not only a withdrawal, but also a means of resuming a "normal" life and of feeling useful by participating in the reconstruction efforts of the country.

B. 1947-73 The Repression (In French we use the term "occultation") The psychological climate of post-war France contributed therefore at first to delay a clear and global realization of the extermination process of the Jews in Nazi Europe. The fate of the Jewish deportees remains merged at first in the much vaster fate of the "political deportees", without mention being made of the slightest religious distinction.

In the secular and republican France of the IVth Republic, which succeeded the provisional government of the Liberation, it is unthinkable to point out the religious affiliation of certain categories of deportees. It would indeed be a serious infringement on the principles of republican universalism, Judaism being defined as a religion and religion belonging exclusively to the private sphere, the French authorities therefore dispose of this specificity. Furthermore the painful experience of the anti-Jewish persecutions of the war years drives a majority of survivors to avoid wanting to call too much attention to themselves. They too at first are therefore often satisfied to appear simply as victims among others of Nazi Germany.

The obscuring of the genocide of the Jews becomes institutionalized afterwards because for the public authorities the point is to eliminate all reminders of the collapse of May-June 1940, the military occupation and division of the country, the Vichy regime and the Franco-French war which then put national unity to a severe test. The anti-Jewish measures of Vichy (the roundup of the Vel d'Hiv, Drancy and the racial deportation) cannot be evoked because that would prevent the French from sharing in the myth of a united and reconciled France. In the eyes of the public authorities, to recall former divisions too frequently is also, in a way, to prevent or delay the healing of old wounds. To accelerate national reconciliation, the authorities therefore choose to turn the page on the purge rapidly by adopting as of 1951 and 1953 the first major amnesty laws for the Occupation period. Thanks to the Amnesty, the painful chapter of Vichy and the black years is therefore closed less than ten years after the Liberation. It also becomes more difficult in these conditions to evoke the specific fate of the Jews during this period.

Moreover, the myth of a heroic resistance, defended at first by the Gaullists and the Communists, will be widely taken up and developed afterwards by the successive governments of the IVth Republic. At the beginning of the Vth Republic, with the return to office of General de Gaulle from 1958 to 1969, this myth even reaches its apogee, giving birth to a whole republican ritual: ceremonies, declarations, commemorations... The exaltation of an entire nation

united in the Resistance and the Liberation has a flip side however: it contributes to marginalizing the fate of the Jews during the war, because the simple evocation of this subject would prevent the myth from functioning well.

In the dominant discourse in France in the 1960s and 1970s, the persecution of the Jews during the war does not appear at the heart of public debates because, in the cold war climate which divides the world into two antagonistic blocks, it is also necessary to be tactful with France's special new ally, i.e. the German Federal Republic. Indeed how can one push for a "Franco-German reconciliation", the central axis of French foreign policy since the beginnings of the IVth Republic, if one continues to stress the role of Nazi Germany in the extermination of the Jews. In 1956, for example, France withdraws Alain Resnais' documentary film "Night and Fog" from the official presentation of the Cannes film festival in order not to offend the German Federal Republic.

The Cold War, the myth of a reconciled France, and republican secularism thus play a non negligible role in masking the genocide of the Jews from 1947 to 1973. How can one then explain the reversal in perspective of the beginning of the 1970s?

#### C. 1974-2008 The Obsession

The period 1947-1973 was marked by the progressive emergence of the fate of the Jews during the Second World War. Certainly research progressed steadily, and, following a series of major trials (of Eichmann in Jerusalem, and of various Nazis in Dusseldorf, Cologne and Frankfurt), the testimony of survivors aroused an increasingly sharp interest in public opinion. But during this period the progress of historiography remained slow. And it often took years before the work of scholars reached the public at large. It's only in the 1970s that things accelerate: public opinion becomes aware more rapidly of research on the genocide of the Jews thanks to better media coverage (publishing, press, television). We witness a complete reversal of perspective: from marginal, anecdotal, the fate of the Jews becomes central and inescapable. And it's not only a flash in the pan because this phenomenon turns out to be lasting. Over the years the public even becomes insatiable and the social demand almost obsessive: in the 1980s and 1990s books, films and conferences continue to multiply. From that point on, all one has to do is open a newspaper, look at the bookstore shelves or the television channel listings to understand the major place that the genocide of the Jews occupies in the French public arena. Today even a hurried traveler can find a good novel or a serious historical study in any airport or large railroad station without difficulty.

The growing interest in France in the question of the genocide of the Jews must be linked first of all to the rereading, beginning in the 1970s, of the Vichy regime. This rereading is transmitted notably through the film of Marcel Ophuls "The Sorrow and the Pity" (1971), the book by Robert Paxton "Vichy France" (1973) and the scandal following the revisionist declarations of Louis Darquier de Pellepoix, published in the weekly magazine "L'Express" (1978). The myth of a France having had no responsibility in the matter begins to give way, leading to the opening up of the the national archives (1979) and to sharp debates which fuel the political and legal press.

At the end of several years of polemics during the presidency of François Mitterand (1981-1995), the new president of the Republic, Jacques Chirac, recognized publicly and clearly the responsibility of France with regard to the anti-Jewish policies (1995).

Beyond the interest in Vichy, what also contributes to stimulating the curiosity of French public opinion starting in the 1970s, is no doubt the fact that, as in other countries, following decolonization, the upheavals of May 1968 and the Vietnam War, people become more interested in the fate of minorities and small groups mistreated by history than in military questions and the heroism of combatants. The history of the Shoah falls within / is part of this perspective in which one identifies above all with the victims and one gives priority to, following other massacres of civilian populations (Cambodia, Yugoslavia, Rwanda...), the Rights of Man. It is moreover the moment when the expression "deportation" in France becomes increasingly associated in everyday speech with the Jews and when the Hebrew word "Shoah" begins to be accepted to designate the specific fate of the Jews during the Second World War. For a new generation, admiration of military heroism thus gives way to a manifest interest in the civilian victims.

II. The vectors of this change in perception In France, as elsewhere in the world, over a period of several decades, the change in attitudes plays a major role in the change in perception of the Shoah. Positivist history gives way henceforth to the calling into question of the "dominant" vision and to an increase in the status of small groups. Political, ideological and social transformations do not constitute the only motor for this change. Education, the trials and artistic creation will also contribute widely to it.

#### A. Education

France has never been a country in the avant-garde in the writing of the history of the Shoah. Even today there still does not exist a team of researchers on this theme in the country. Nor is there a university chair devoted to the subject. Obviously that does not mean in any way that nothing is done on the Shoah in higher education. For at least about ten years, conferences, courses, seminars, lectures, exhibits and publications have on the contrary tended to increase, and not exclusively in Paris. There are excellent scholars on the subject (Henry Rousso, Annette Wieviorka, Florent Brayard, Edouard Husson...) but a "French School" capable of uniting the initiatives of institutions or isolated individuals is still lacking.

With regard to education, French distinctiveness probably lies less in advanced research than in the teaching of the history of the Shoah to all students at three different levels in their school career:

- for students aged 17-18 in "Première" and "Terminale" (the next to last and final year of high school), the Shoah has been taught since 1983
- for students aged 15 in Third Form beginning in the same time period
- for students aged 9-10 in CM1-CM2 (upper grades of elementary school) since 2002

In theory therefore a student studies this subject (generally for 1 or 2 hours, but sometimes more) in required history courses at three levels of the school curriculum, in both public and private establishments. The initiatives of teachers of other subjects (literature, philosophy, languages...) sometimes supplement the teaching of required history. The question of the Shoah therefore appears in school history textbooks into which the advances in national and international research are rapidly incorporated. It's a subject which comes up regularly on exams (the certificate, for students in Third Form, the baccalaureate, for students in premlère-terminale) and on the competitive exams (known as "concours" ) for the recruitment of teachers of history-geography. In 2001-03 the book "If This is a Man" (published in the United States as "Survival in

Auschwitz") by Primo Levi was also on the curriculum of the baccalaureate in French. The number of students visiting Auschwitz has increased greatly these past years. One may therefore conclude that the subject is relatively familiar to an entire generation formed by the school system in France over approximately the last twenty years.

#### B. The Trials

We know the importance of the trials of the war criminals in sensitizing public opinion to and diffusing information about the genocide of the Jews. The trials of Nuremberg (1945-46), Eichmann (1961-62) and Frankfurt (1964-65) of those responsible for Auschwitz moreover had obvious pedagogic value, especially at a time when the subject was still poorly grasped. In France the trials of Touvier, Barbier and Papon also had a considerable impact on public opinion, in a completely different context. These trials take place within a specific legal framework. The amnesty laws, adopted at the beginning of the 1950s, had contributed at first to throw a legal veil over the crimes of the Occupation. Things remained like that for several years until the adoption of a new law on the non-applicability of statutory limitation to "crimes against humanity" which was then essentially aimed at German Nazis. It is this law, adopted in December 1964, which allowed the reopening of the files of the French accomplices in the genocide of the Jews. The first to be subject to the law is the Milicien Paul Touvier, condemned to death in absentia after the Liberation (in 1946-47) and pardoned by President Pompidou in November 1971. When this presidential pardon became known the following year, there were repeated protests by Resistance members and deportees. In 1973 a new charge is lodged against Touvier for crimes against humanity. Touvier goes into hiding once again but is finally arrested, years later, in May 1989. Sent before the appellate court of Paris, to the general surprise, at first his case is dismissed in April 1992. But the decision is overturned and Touvier is tried again, this time solely for the seven crimes against Jews in Rillieux (near Lyon) in 1944, that he had admitted years earlier. In 1994 he is finally condemned to life imprisonment for "complicity in crimes against humanity".

Klaus Barbie, former head of the Gestapo in Lyon from 1942 to 1944, was condemned to death in absentia by French law in 1952. He is regarded at that time primarily as the person responsible for the death of Jean Moulin and the torturer of Resistance members in Lyon. After the war he had succeeded in fleeing and, after all sorts of adventures, had finally taken refuge in Bolivia. Extradited to France in February 1983, he will be indicted for "crimes against humanity", charged notably with the arrest and deportation of the Jewish children of Izieu. His trial which takes place in Lyon four years later, from the 11th of May to the 4th of July, makes the front pages of the newspapers almost daily. It becomes a veritable "history lesson" in which Resistance members and survivors express themselves at length. The trial ends with the condemnation of the accused to life imprisonment.

The Maurice Papon Affair explodes on May 6, 1981, between the two rounds of the Giscard-Mitterrand presidential election. The former Prefect of Police of Paris (1958-1966), then Minister of the Budget in the Barre-Giscard government, is accused by the Left wing satirical weekly "Le Canard Enchaîné" of being implicated in the deportation of the Jews of Bordeaux from 1942 to 1944, while he was secretary general of the prefecture of the Gironde. Several months after the election of François Mitterrand, in December 1981, a first charge is lodged against him. He is officially indicted for "crimes against humanity" in January 1983. A polemic about his responsibility regarding anti-Jewish policy and his engagement in the Resistance rages on for years. After

17 years of legal battles, the trial of Papon finally opens in Bordeaux in October 1997. It gives rise practically every day to long accounts on television, on the radio and in the press. The former minister is condemned to 10 years imprisonment in April 1998 but is set free "for reasons of health" in September 2002.

Despite their length and their imperfections these great trials undeniably played an important role in helping French public opinion grasp the meaning of the Shoah. They also helped stimulate a whole historical, legal and ethical examination. In addition, they permitted the families of the victims to speak out and to obtain justice, and not solely on the symbolic level.

### C. Artistic Creation

Certain artistic works will also contribute to placing the Shoah at the very heart of the mental universe of the French.

In the literary domain one should mention the early publications of the novels and essays of Robert Merle (*Death is My Profession*, 1952), Elie Wiesel (*Night*, 1958), André Schwartz-Barth (*The Last of the Just*, Prix Goncourt 1959), Patrick Modiano (*La Place de l'étoile*, 1968), Georges Perec (*The Disappearance*, 1969), Joseph Joffo (*A Bag of Marbles*, 1971), Romain Gary (*Madame Rosa*, Prix Goncourt 1975, under the pseudonym of Emile Ajar)... Even before the progress in the historiography of the Shoah of the 1980s, it is literature most of all which arouses curiosity about and interest in the fate of the Jews during the war. The considerable publishing success in France these past years of the books of Jonathan Littell (*Les Bienveillantes*, Prix Goncourt 2006), Philippe Claudel (*Le rapport de Brodeck*, 2007) and Héléne Berr (*Journal*, 2007) shows that literature still plays an important role in the perception of the memory of the history of the Shoah.

In the realm of the image France has admittedly not produced works as popular as the T.V. series *Holocaust* or *Schindler's List* by Steven Spielberg. Nevertheless one should not neglect the contributions of Alain Resnais (*Night and Fog*, 1956), Frédéric Rossif (*The Time of the Ghetto*, 1961), Marce Ophuls (*The Sorrow and the Pity*, 1971), Joseph Losey (*Monsieur Klein*, 1976), Francois Truffaut (*The Last Metro*, 1980), Claude Lanzmann (*Shoah*, 1985), Louis Malle (*Au revoir les enfants*, 1987), Roman Polanski (*The Pianist*, 2002), Costa-Gavras (*Amen*, 2002)... One can therefore say that a good part of the elite of the French cinema also contributed with talent to sensitize public opinion to the diverse aspects of the genocide of the Jews during the Second World War.

In the field of the plastic arts, one must at least call attention to the particularly innovative work of the plastic artist Christian Boltanski, dedicated to a great extent to the memory of the Shoah.

Artistic creation as a whole, like the trials and teaching, has contributed to the awareness of the Shoah by public opinion. The efforts of the Jews themselves have also played a determining role in the evolution of its perception. We will examine in what way they did this.

### III. The Jews of France: actors in the change of perception

The Jews of France suffered greatly during the Second World War.

Suddenly outlawed from society starting in the autumn of 1940, they were then singled out, despoiled and persecuted until the Liberation in 1944. 75,000 of them (out of a population of about 320-330,000) were arrested and deported, i.e. one Jew in four or five disappeared during the conflict. In this country, which was less affected than others in Europe, practically no Jewish family was spared.

After the Liberation and the collapse of Nazi Germany, a very small number of deportees (no doubt less than 3,000) return. This creates a considerable and lasting trauma because family members continue to hope for and wait for their return, sometimes for years. This pain, experienced at first as an individual tragedy, also has consequences for the collective evolution. The trauma and severe demographic losses will indeed weaken the Jewish communities of France, disorganize them and lead them to withdraw into themselves for a long time. Synagogues are empty, Jewish organizations stagnate, and it is even difficult to renew the leadership of the principal institutions.

In this exceptional psychological context, the reconstruction of French Judaism will be slow and difficult. The first priority is to take charge of the orphaned children, to get back the stolen property (in particular the apartments which almost always have new occupants) and to resume a semblance of normal life in a country which is also largely devastated. This is not easy. All the more so since, as we have emphasized, the country is celebrating the myth of a France closely united in the combats of the Resistance and the Reconstruction.

In the postwar years the Jews of France therefore cannot call attention to themselves by stressing, for example, the role of Vichy with regard to the anti-Jewish persecutions. They adopt a low profile, denouncing only "Nazi barbarity" and hoping thus to rejoin more rapidly the national community from which they were excluded during the black years.

Even during the Finaly Affair in 1952-53, when it is a question of getting back two Jewish orphans, converted and kidnapped by an order of Catholic nuns, Jewish leaders do everything to avoid a direct confrontation. The community representatives fight courageously to have the children returned. They eventually attain their goals, not without difficulty, but discreetly, and avoiding all publicity.

We find the same state of mind to some extent when the Tomb of the Unknown Jewish Martyr is inaugurated in the very heart of Paris in the Marais in 1956. This is the first memorial in the world which evokes the specific fate of the Jewish victims. Nevertheless in order not to cut themselves off from the rest of the population, they utilize in the very name of the monument a reference to the secular and republican model of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier on the Champs Elysées under the Arch of Triumph. They still keep silent about the role of Vichy which is nowhere mentioned, and alongside the names of the Jewish extermination camps, they write the names of the concentration camps destined for political deportees. An ecumenical religious reference engraved on the facade of the building also underscores the desire not to cut oneself off from the largely Catholic population. This conciliatory attitude continues into the 1960s and 70s when the behavior of the Jews of France begins to change. Several factors brought this about.

First of all there is a demographic factor. Following decolonization, the Sephardic Jews of North Africa (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia) emigrated en masse beginning at the end of the 1950s. More than 250,000 returned to France at the end of the 1960s. Having become the majority, they contribute to the revitalization of a sclerotic and debilitated French Judaism. Having had a different historical experience from that of the Ashkenazi Jews, they are more involved in community life and less disposed to compromise with manifestations (real or supposed) of anti-Semitism. Their life experience and their dynamism will contribute to upset habits and renew French Judaism.

Another factor accelerates the change in the Jewish communities: it is the shock linked to the Arab-Israeli conflicts and the ensuing rise in anti-Semitism in France, the proliferation of anti-Semitic attacks and declarations including revisionist ones. These events play a determining role in the definition of Jewish identity. From then on, certain of the most assimilated French Jews, as for example the intellectual Raymond Aron, openly and publicly proclaim their origins. It incites others to go farther and question openly if, with regard to anti-Semitism, Vichy was indeed only a parenthesis.

In the wake of the race riots on the West coast of the United States, the student unrest of 1968 and the Vietnam War, the "roots phenomenon" begins to affect France starting in the 1970s. It's the beginning of the calling into question of a single national identity, secular and republican first and foremost, and also the beginning of the increasing status of all "community" identities: religious, linguistic, regional... It then becomes possible to claim a distinct past without for that reason being ipso facto excluded from the national community. It is in this context that, beginning in the 1980s, certain Jewish figures who are not necessarily at the outset specialists of the Shoah contribute actively to the recovery of the memory and history of the Shoah.

The historian of ancient Greece, Pierre Vidal-Naquet, an anticolonial activist both of whose parents died in deportation, joins heart and soul in the fight against revisionism. He is one of the first to denounce the lies of Robert Faurisson and to attack the "assassins of memory".

The film-maker Claude Lanzmann, who made the film "Shoah" in 1985, contributes for his part to popularizing the use of the Hebrew word "catastrophe" in France. He allows the survivors to speak at length and demonstrates the entire process of the extermination of the Jews. It is this film which is the starting point for understanding the extermination of the Jews by a Jewish, non-Jewish, French and foreign public. Even today it remains a major reference work.

The lawyer, Serge Klarsfeld, whose father died in deportation during the war, devotes himself actively, for his part, to raising the status of the memory of the deportees. Beginning in 1979, he heads the Association of the Sons and Daughters of Jews Deported from France and writes important works on the subject, notably the Memorial to the Deportation of the Jews of France (first edition 1978) which contains the names of the 75,000 deported Jews. He is also a key figure in the trials which I have mentioned, in the opening of the memorial site and museum house of the children of Izieu(1994) and in the public recognition by President Jacques Chirac of French responsibility in the deportation of the Jews (July 1995).

The former president of the European Parliament, Simone Veil, herself deported to Auschwitz, presided for her part over The Foundation for the Memory of the Shoah at its creation (2000) This foundation was created by the French government following the work of the Matteoli Commission on the pillaging of Jewish property in France (1997). It has become the principal institution financing the remembrance of and research on this subject. Simone Veil played a major role in the decision of the the European Council to make January 27th the "Day of Remembrance and Prevention of Crimes against Humanity" (2002). The FMS has also made possible the renovation of the CDJC-Memorial of the Shoah in France with the construction of the wall bearing the names of the Jewish deportees (2005) and the Wall of the Just (2007).



In conclusion, i would say that it is not only the presence of a large Jewish community which has permitted the Shoah to become firmly anchored in the collective consciousness of the French, but also the active involvement of the Jews in the history and memory of the deportation which has certainly accelerated and stimulated the awareness of the French authorities. It is this engagement, taken up in turn by the whole of society in a true pedagogical enterprise (artistic, cultural, legal), which has contributed to this evolution.

This represents an obvious difference with other countries in Europe in which the Shoah had also wrought terrible devastation.

For the institutions in charge of the memory of the Shoah the question arises as to the place of this history in a unified Europe. Admittedly the Shoah is spoken of more and more everywhere but, for all that, is it spoken of better and better? Isn't the Shoah on the way to becoming an icon of suffering without real relationship to national history? Doesn't it sometimes become a pretext for disposing of other burning historical or political questions? Don't we see the appearance almost everywhere of debatable comparisons with other massacres and other sufferings (slavery, decolonization, communism...)? One can legitimately wonder whether this type of evolution might not lead to an exploitation and trivialization of the Shoah in the future. To avoid this double pitfall, it is important to place the Shoah as much as possible within the context of each country's national and specific history.

Claude Singer, November 2008