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Introduction

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Book Forum

Introduction

Jan Burzlaff

"People pass by the Germans without seeing them. They are surrounded by silence. Silence in the trains, in the *métro*, in the street. Each keeps their thoughts to themselves. And yet one senses the hostility."[1] As the economist Charles Rist (1874–1955) noted in his Parisian diary, many contemporaries in France embraced these anti-German sentiments between 1940 and 1944.[2] But silence meant more than resentment for the resounding defeat in May 1940, and more than growing opposition to the Nazi occupation, first in the Northern Zone, then across the entire country after November 1942. In *The Survival of the Jews in France, 1940–44* (2019), the historian and political scientist Jacques Sémelin adds another meaning of this "silence" to our understanding of Vichy France. Silence was used passively, as civil disobedience toward the Germans, but it also coalesced into many small gestures to help Jews. Between the noise of anti-Jewish decrees, the state-led persecution, and organized rescue, Sémelin detects silence as a means to support the Jews: at times a mere smile from a stranger or a warning nod on the street. Focusing on the lived experiences of those 220,000 Jews who were not deported (75 percent of the Jewish population in France), Sémelin argues that not the least small gestures of aid by the French population helped them survive the war. What follows is an interdisciplinary forum dedicated to these innovative perspectives on Jews, Vichy France, and Holocaust and genocide studies.

There is much life (*vie*) in survival (*survie*), after all, and Sémelin significantly contributes to studying the wartime *lives* of Jews—both foreign Jews and those born in France, whom he designates as French *Israélites*, as did contemporary sources. To this day, most works on Vichy France and the Jews have been concerned with the state's role in the Holocaust. After an initially chilly reception, particularly in France, the historian Robert O. Paxton's *Vichy France* (1972) has become the starting point for any study of the period. Paxton chronicled the persecution's timeline and the regime's

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collaboration with the Nazis in exchange for a prominent place in the new European order. This top-down perspective on the bureaucracy and administration only strengthened with the subsequent *Vichy France and the Jews* (1981), which Paxton published with fellow historian Michael R. Marrus. The book, precisely because it emphasized the interplay between Nazi pressure and French initiatives, has become a classic, now available in an updated edition.[3] However, neither book convincingly explained why 75 percent of the approximately 300,000 Jews in France survived the Holocaust. It is only recently that scholars have begun to examine the Jews themselves.[4]

This lack of insight into Jewish experiences can be traced back to the traditional boundaries within French and Jewish history. For example, consider the sophisticated debates about Jewish assimilation in the French Third Republic (1870–1940). An emerging consensus holds that the Republic never requested full assimilation from the *Israélites*.[5] Leading up to the "dark years" (*années noires*) of Vichy France, debates then usually shift focus from "assimilation" to "persecution," the effectiveness of Vichy's "collaboration," and "public opinion"—questions that have shaped the painful reckoning with the national past since the 1980s.[6]

Sémelin embraces a refreshingly different path. In a sense, he takes us back to the social histories of individual towns written during the 1980s, with chapters on population flows, socioeconomic hardship, and the occupation creeping into daily life.[7] When the historian John F. Sweet, in his *Choices in Vichy France* (1986), wrote about choices, he meant Christians, mostly Catholic, and their complex attitudes toward the regime in Clermont-Ferrand.[8] When Sémelin writes about choices, he means Jews on a nationwide level. His book is permeated by this multiplicity of choices, times, places, and encounters of seventeen individuals and families attempting to circumvent the persecution and escape deportation. Although the survivor and historian Annie Kriegel (1926–1995) has long proposed examining Jews' survival strategies, Sémelin is the first to do so systematically.

The four chapters exemplify Jews' wartime experiences through geographical dispersion, their concealment among the population, and the spontaneous aid extended to the persecuted. Sémelin defines the variety of forms of support as "social reactivity," that is, "the wide range of small

gestures of aid and protection offered to Jews by individuals, whether or not they already knew each other. These small gestures in some cases had large, lifesaving consequences."[9] Among these helpers, four characters stand out: the host, the guardian angel, the falsifier, and the smuggler. These small gestures went beyond organized rescue (*sauvetage*), even before mass roundups and deportations began in the summer of 1942.[10] Along with France's geography and its culture, including Christian charity, republican traditions, and a patriotic mindset, Sémelin argues that only a "multifactorial approach"[11] helps explain the survival of three-fourths of the Jews in France.

First published in French in 2013, Sémelin's book has enjoyed a mixed reception. Most remarkably, it has been one of a few French-language books to be debated in the *New York Review of Books*. The discussion between Paxton and Sémelin therein illustrates some of the major controversies at play: the degree to which certain groups welcomed Vichy's antisemitic legislation before 1942; the continuities between the refugee policies of the 1930s and Vichy's xenophobia; the inadequate links between the thirty or so sources and the claims Sémelin makes; and the overall presence of the German occupiers in Sémelin's narrative.[12] In particular, Paxton criticized Sémelin's argument that non-Jews expressed sympathy and support before the summer of 1942, which traces back to Paxton's conviction that "a widespread hostility toward Jews . . . was both sincere and homegrown."[13] As the four contributors will thoroughly engage with all these arguments, I will limit myself to two remarks: the role of public opinion and the Jews' own behaviors.

Any in-depth analysis of French public opinion is absent from earlier accounts, including that by Paxton and Marrus. Here, I believe, lies one of Sémelin's chief merits. In a piece entitled "Eloquence of Silence" ("Éloquence du silence"), the late historian Pierre Laborie (1936–2017) powerfully called into question the relationship between the population's apparent passivity and its approval of Vichy policies. "Why keep silent," Laborie asks, "about what would be desired and expected—'the punishment' of the Jews designated as responsible for France's misfortune—when nothing compels it? What does silence mean, then?"[14] Building on Laborie, Sémelin further reverses this notion of monolithic approval of anti-Jewish policies by the general population. Instead, he makes a compelling case for the ambivalence

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of attitudes before the summer of 1942. All scholars agree that the onset of the large-scale arrests at that time represented a turning point in the public mood, but Sémelin convincingly unravels a widespread phenomenon of small gestures of support before 1942 in two distinct ways. First, he foregoes the unwarranted and still prevailing suspicion toward first-person accounts, particularly among French scholars. He gives voice to various survivors, viewing them as actors in history, but also analyzes their perceptions of French society. Second, and precisely thanks to this bottom-up approach, Sémelin shows how the concept of social reactivity allows for much-needed nuance. It does not require unanimity within the overall population, and it designates fleeting moments absent from French and Nazi archives. For those insights, we need Jewish testimonies.

To be sure, Sémelin's sources are limited to published memoirs and interviews. But my ongoing research on Jews in and around Marseille reaches the same conclusion in hundreds of diaries, memoirs, and video testimonies. The sympathetic behaviors that Sémelin depicts—such as offering a helping hand in crossing the demarcation line, warning a stranger, or sheltering someone for a few hours—were omnipresent. Moreover, these behaviors do not necessarily contradict the approval of Vichy policies in other areas. In the last two decades, scholars have demonstrated how much individual activities followed day-to-day needs and moods, and antisemitism had a pragmatic rather than an ideological bent.[15] Ultimately, few people gave blanket approval to the government throughout its short existence. Thus, scholars of the Holocaust should be more open to the inconsistency and change of human behaviors over time. In the *Bouches du Rhône* department and Marseille, social reactivity proved high, which goes against earlier claims that rural areas were the most inhospitable to Jews.[16]

Reading Sémelin's book with special attention to the period of 1940–42, one realizes the insufficiency of our very conceptual tools—think of the coupling "resistance/rescue," the "Righteous of the Nations," and "persecution."[17] Many more people engaged in small gestures of anti-German and pro-Jewish behaviors, even fleetingly, than collaborated with the Nazis, joined the French Resistance, or rescued Jews in formal and informal networks. The history of Vichy France and its social fabric was far more complex

than the image presented nowadays in the public sphere, with 100,000 resisters, 100,000 collaborators, and nearly 40 million people stubbornly "waiting it out" (*attentisme*). Far from being a mere extension of "resistance," the concept of "social reactivity" invites much-needed social and cultural histories of the Holocaust in France.[18] I believe that it can capture the diversity of everyday life and lived experiences in occupied and (until November 1942) unoccupied France.

In the same vein, Sémelin invites us to appreciate the historical complexities of Vichy France. Few French readers, let alone readers outside France, know that five geographies of persecution coexisted within the national territory. One of the book's merits is to call for more comparisons regarding non-Jews' attitudes depending on this geography. Thus far, Sémelin's findings point to significant differences between the Occupied Zone and the Free Zone before November 1942. What was the exact relationship between exclusionary policies and competition over scarce resources, and how did it affect social reactivity on a local and regional level? Furthermore, we do not know much about those officials who, at times, hindered the persecution at the local level. To this day, no exhaustive study of all those who worked for the Germans in France has been written.[19]

My second comment relates to the behaviors of the Jews themselves. We need more fine-grained studies of individual and collective behaviors at the national, regional, and local levels. It remains to be seen whether French people helped Jews more frequently than other west Europeans—in short, what was particular to French society. In a recent study, I concluded that the Netherlands seems to have witnessed a more linear process of non-Jews' disobedience after May 1940 than Vichy France.[20] But further comparisons are also needed about the diversity of Jews *within* the national borders. To what extent did prewar experiences affect individual choices after May 1940? The conceptual vagueness of *Israélite*—which equates a naturalized Jew originally from Warsaw with a family that claimed a proud French lineage stretching over centuries—deserves further consideration. As it stands, this blanket category does not allow for further differentiation. One possibility is to examine groups by nationality, as Adrien Dallaire sets out to do for the Vaucluse department.[21] Did foreign Jews (and, if so, from what

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country of origin) experience more social reactivity than French-born Jews, precisely because the former lacked reliable networks of support from the prewar period? How did the deep ties woven between French-born Jews and the Third Republic impact choices of flight, evasion, compliance, and coping, especially in the Southern Zone? My ongoing research finds that these behaviors, which draw on the political scientist Evgeny Finkel's *Ordinary Jews* (2017), apply not only to east European ghettos, but also to Jews across Nazi-occupied Europe. Gender, financial resources, and age were crucial criteria in whether Jews picked evasion over coping. Mobility was itself a survival tactic: one in three people in France were on the move between 1940 and 1944.[22]

Future studies also need to show how, when, and why some changed their survival strategy. Sémelin's choice to narrate the survival of the well-known Saul Friedländer, Léon Poliakov, Annie Kriegel, and Stanley Hoffmann is understandable, given the difficulty of doing justice to hundreds of individual trajectories and the overrepresentation of foreign Jews in the archives. Rather than considering this aspect a default, we should consider it an invitation to study the topic more quantitatively.[23] Last but not least, Sémelin's concentration on metropolitan France requires us to tackle the French-controlled territories of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia, where 500,000 Jews lived in 1939. Here, I see fruitful exchanges between the "colonial turn" in Jewish history and the growing literature on the Holocaust in North Africa and the Middle East.[24]

For all these reasons, there is much to commend in this important book. Given Sémelin's interdisciplinary background in psychology, political science, and history, I invited a group of scholars to evaluate these findings, each from the perspective of their discipline. I wish to thank the contributors and Jacques Sémelin, who all generously agreed to participate in this forum long before COVID-19 turned the world upside down.

NOTES

1. Sémelin, *The Survival of the Jews in France, 1940–44,* 1.
2. Rist, *Une saison gâtée*, 107.

3. Paxton, *Vichy France*; Marrus and Paxton, *Vichy France and the Jews*; Seibel, *Persecution and Rescue*.
4. In the latest *Revue d'Histoire de la Shoah*, three of the eleven contributions are about the Jews themselves. See also Mallet, *Vichy*; Poznanski, *Les Juifs*.
5. See "French Jewish History: A Forum on the Field"; Joly, *L'État*.
6. See Nord, *After the Deportation*.
7. Agulhon, *Toulon*; Merriman, *Limoges*. For an overview, see Beaupré, *Les Français*.
8. Sweet, *Choices*.
9. Sémelin, 193.
10. Poznanski, "The Rescue of Jews." 259.
11. Sémelin, 259.
12. Paxton, "Jews." See also Caron, "Review," 445–46; Rousso, "Une bonne question," 183.
13. Marrus and Paxton, *Vichy France and the Jews*, 179.
14. Laborie, "Éloquence du silence," 256; Laborie, *Le Chagrin*, 253–55.
15. Caron, 2003, in Bankier, 376. For the general context, see Jackson, *France: The Dark Years*, 281; Laborie, *L'Opinion Française*, 144.
16. Central in Marrus and Paxton, *Vichy France and the Jews*.
17. Also noted in Lee, *Pétain's Jewish Children*; Gensburger, *Les politiques publiques*, 64–71.
18. The same conclusions are reached in Doulut et Lazare, *Ni héros ni salauds*.
19. Semelin, *Survival*, 110, for further references.
20. Burzlaff, "Silence and Small Gestures: Jews and Non-Jews in the Netherlands (1940–1944)," Revise and Resubmit, *Contemporary European History*.
21. Dallaire, "Pourquoi eux," and classically Klarsfeld, *Vichy-Auschwitz*, 180.
22. Finkel, *Ordinary Jews*, and *Forum*. For a good example of this mobility, see the testimony of J. Moda, Wiener Library, 1656/3/4/734.
23. In this vein, see Barton, *Reproductive Citizens*, 183ff.
24. First insights into Semelin, *Survival*, 169 and 232; Kenbib, "Morrocan Jews"; Katz et al., *Colonialism*; Stein and Boum, *Holocaust*.

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