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Review

Reviewed Work(s): Sarah's Key by Stéphane Marsil, Gilles Paquet-Brenner, Serge Joncour and Tatiana de Rosnay; La Rafle by Ilan Goldman and Roselyn Bosch

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FILM REVIEWS

Sarah's Key

Produced by Stéphane Marsil; directed by Gilles Paquet-Brenner; screenplay by Serge Joncour and Gilles Paquet-Brenner based on the novel by Tatiana de Rosnay; cinematography by Pascal Ridao; music by Max Richter; production design by Françoise Dupertuis; art direction by Clément Sentilhes; editing by Hervé Schneid; costumes by Eric Perron; starring Kristin Scott Thomas, Mélusine Mayance, Niels Arestrup, Frédéric Pierrot, Michel Duchaussoy, Dominique Frot, Gisèle Casadesus, Aidan Quinn and Charlotte Poutrel. Color, 115 min. Distributed by The Weinstein Company, <http://weinsteinco.com>.

La Rafle

Produced by Ilan Goldman; directed by Roselyn Bosch; original screenplay by Roselyn Bosch; advisor Serge Klarsfeld; cinematography by David Ungaro; production design by Olivier Raoux; music by Christian Henson; costumes by Pierre-Jean Laarroke; editing by Yann Malcor; starring Jean Reno, Mélanie Laurent, Gad Elmaleh, Raphaëlle Agogué, Hugo Leverdez, Olivier Cywie, Mathieu and Romain Di Concetto, Sylvie Testud; Rebecca Marder, Anne Brochet, Catherine Allégret, Thierry Frémont, and Isabelle Gélinas. Color, 124 min., French with English subtitles. Distributed by Menemsha Films, www.menemshafilms.com.

For almost seventy years, practically nothing was known in the U.S. about the horrifying moment in World War II France when 13,152 Jews (among them 5,082 women and 4,115 children) were rounded up by French police, kept in the stifling Winter Cycling Stadium without food, water, or proper sanitation for a week, then shipped in boxcars to French concentration camps south of Paris before their eventual extermination in Auschwitz; the few cases of escape notwithstanding, none of the deported children survived. Known as the Vel d'Hiv Roundup (named for the glass-domed sports arena in the shadow of the Eiffel Tower where the families were held), this raid and arrest of Jewish families throughout Paris on July 16-17, 1942 (and seconded in August in the pathetically misnamed Free Zone of Vichy France), is what many historians deem the darkest event in modern French history; some have even called it the "Massacre of the Innocents." This singular event of the Shoah in France, a traumatic moment of infamy, then of amnesia, then of commemoration, and now (disturbingly) finally, for Americans, of introduction, had

received scant cinematic attention, namely in the 1974 *Les Guichets du Louvre* (*Black Thursday*) by Michel Mitrani, and in Joseph Losey's 1976 *Mr. Klein*, each of which alluded to but never depicted the indescribable suffering in the interior of the stadium itself. Nor had any film attempted a representation of the French transit camps. In fact, one of the few existing photos of Beaune-la-Rolande, revealing a French gendarme's kepi as he stood guard, had been famously excised by censors from Alain Resnais's and Jean Cayrol's 1955 documentary *Night and Fog* because it evidenced French complicity in the persecution of Jews in the Holocaust.

Now, somewhat uncannily, released within a single year, two major feature fiction films made by French directors and enhanced by stellar casts have re-created both the Vel d'Hiv and the Loiret camps with unprecedented attention to historical detail. Released in Europe in March of 2010, *La Rafle* (*The Roundup*), written and directed by Roselyn Bosch, and *Sarah's Key* (*Elle s'appelait Sarah*), released in October of the same year and directed by Gilles Paquet-Brenner, with a screenplay by Paquet-Brenner and Serge Joncour based on Tatiana de Rosnay's bestselling novel, have both arrived in the U.S. Because of the coincidental simultaneity of their release, it is inevitable that the films will be compared. Indeed, the worldwide popularity of de Rosnay's novel has turned the author into something of an impromptu Vel d'Hiv historian, leading her to note that while *La Rafle* shows the events, *Sarah's Key* shows the scars they produced. For Rose Bosch, less concerned with a com-

elling fiction than with the veracity of her depiction, the desire to describe the circumstances *as experienced* (particularly by children) governed her decision to show not only the world of French Jews before and after the roundups, but also to trace the very systematic way these roundups were organized by officials of the French state in concert with the occupying German forces. *Sarah's Key* is a high-concept commercial film lavishly promoted by The Weinstein Company. *La Rafle*, more comprehensive in scope and avowedly educational in its aims (a two-hour, contextualizing French television program and a thoroughly researched teaching kit are available), will be distributed here by Menemsha Films. Since the signal accomplishment of both films is the exquisitely detailed reproduction of the unspeakable brutality of the roundups by French police, the powerful reconstruction of the Dante-esque interior of the Vel d'Hiv, with its crowded, anguished families, and the terrifying barbarity of the separation scenes in the Loiret camps, it seems imperative that rather than viewing these films as competing versions of a painful history, they should be seen as complementing one another, each providing facets of a complex and disturbing legacy that vitally impacts our moral life today.

Long considered by historians as the "hinge" moment in the persecution of Jews in France, this early-morning roundup marked the first arrest of Jewish women and children (many of the latter having been born in France), giving it inaugural prominence in the machinery of extermination of



Kristin Scott Thomas is a journalist trying to solve a historical mystery in *Sarah's Key*.

the Final Solution, and, paradoxically, awakening the French populace to the severity of the danger for all French Jews. More significantly, from that point on, every Jewish child, regardless of age or origin, became a target of persecution, expulsion, and, inevitably, extermination. There exists only a single photo of the stadium's exterior on that day, with a row of empty buses by its entrance. The original sports arena was demolished in 1959; today a nondescript government building housing the Ministry of the Interior stands on the site. A small plaque referring unabashedly and mystifyingly to "the work of Hitlerian barbarism" was replaced in 1986 by a marble tablet inscribed with the national shame, "for the thirteen thousand Jews arrested by the Vichy government police." Memorialized in newly elected President Jacques Chirac's official *mea culpa* on July 16, 1995 ("France, cradle of the Enlightenment and the Rights of Man, safe haven for the oppressed, on that day committed the irreparable."), the Vel d'Hiv has become the ceremonial place that both films, in very different but precise ways, animate with uncompromising force.

Anyone who learns of this history is immediately moved and horrified by the story of the children, most particularly by the wrenching scenes of separation in the camps as the French government deliberated the children's fate while sending their parents off to annihilation. Both films are motivated by a concern to give these children—known only as figures and statistics—faces and lives. But their strategies differ widely; where *Sarah's Key* symbolizes them through a single iconic child and a journalist's quest to know more, *La Rafle* depicts the fullness and vitality of Jewish lives lost. Publicity for *Sarah's Key* depicts a distraught Kristin Scott Thomas in front of the wall of murdered children (hundreds of photos from Serge Klarsfeld's massive documentation, *French Children of the Holocaust*, 1994) at the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Paris. On the other hand, Rose Bosch's film is entirely immersed in the children's point of view, giving life to the impossible perceptions of vanished children ("We tell the story from the inside. There is no other way").

Bosch used her background as an investigative journalist to research the Vel d'Hiv roundup before writing the scenario, seeking out, and—miraculously—finding one of the few children who escaped from Beaune-la-Rolande. Bosch had heard stories about her husband's (producer Ilan Goldman) family during the War in the vibrant Jewish community of Montmartre. Her decision to create a sort of epic mosaic with at least seventy-four different characters stemmed from the desire to give a comprehensive portrait of the time: the everyday life of Jewish families, the commitment of some of the French (about 12,000 of the 25,000 Jews demanded for the roundup avoided capture), and the bargaining Vichy and Nazi



Ten-year-old Sarah (Mélusine Mayance) is rounded up with other members of her family by French police and taken to the Vélodrome d'Hiver in Paris in *Sarah's Key*.

officials. But her priority was always the perspective of childhood. Moreover every single detail is grounded in reality; as the opening title declares, "All the characters in this film are real. All the events, even the most extreme, really took place in that summer of 1942." Bosch anchors this multiplicity of views in the dual perspective of two protagonists, both based on actual people, the eleven-year-old Joseph Weismann (Hugo Leverdez) who lost his entire family, and the Protestant nurse, Annette Monod (Mélanie Laurent), who continued to attend to prisoners of all kinds until her death in 1995. The undeniably heroic Monod's testimonies are among the few eyewitness accounts of both the Vel d'Hiv and the Loiret camps, as well as the tragic return of survivors to the Hotel Lutetia after the War.

On the other hand, *Sarah's Key*, Tatiana de Rosnay's ninth novel, and the first to launch her to worldwide fame, is an intriguing, investigatory thriller in which a fictional American journalist living in Paris named Julia Jarmond (Kristin Scott Thomas), committed to writing an article about the Vel d'Hiv from today's perspective, discovers that the Marais apartment of her French husband's family in which they are about to move harbors a devastating secret from exactly that time. As her determination to learn more about the ten-year-old Jewish girl (Mélusine Mayance) whose family was taken from that very apartment by the French police in July of 1942 grows more intense, the two stories become intertwined. Real questions about the presence of past horrors and the necessity of remembering result as Julia examines her own life in light of this complicated history, and her personal decisions resonate with the discoveries of the tragic aftermath of the roundup of 1942.

Despite identical source texts, the heart-breaking intensity of the eyewitness accounts on which they are based, and a shared concern with an unprecedented focus on childhood, or the horror as seen through children's eyes, the two films have very different aims and effects. Seeking to show how (in spite of increasing hardships and restrictions) the everyday life of Jewish families was no different from others, Bosch focuses on several families, infusing an iconic Montmartre with the vitality of Yiddish, children's play, and the normality of daily life, making the disruption and descent into genocidal Hell all the more effective as the film proceeds. In order to orchestrate the destinies of both victims and executioners, *La Rafle* remains within the precise time period of 1942–1945, with crosscutting demonstrating the infernal logic of this peculiarly French tragedy. While the main characters in *La Rafle* are based on actual testimonies and newsreel documentation, none of the named figures appears as a fictive avatar in *Sarah's Key* (with a single exception, added by Paquet-Brenner), nor do we see the careful mechanisms of planning. The motivation of *Sarah's Key*, according to the director, is less about instruction than about making this history inclusive and accessible to people with no particular connection to the events. Yet while the high emotional impact of the film comes from Paquet-Brenner's desire to make his audience empathize with the events, irrespective of their opinions or origins, the price of universalizing the tale seems to be in de-Judaizing its content.

Sarah's Key alternates between two time frames, the 1942 scene of the Vel d'Hiv roundup and the contemporary Parisian situation of Julia Jarmond, constantly reminding us of the presence of the ghosts of histo-

ry, and emphasizing Julia's conviction that the truth must always be sought. When French police come for the Starzynski family, little Sarah locks her brother Michel in a cupboard for protection. In the same apartment in present-day Paris (36, rue de Saintonge), Julia surveys the renovation organized by her husband Bertrand (Frédéric Pierrot). The first half of the film alternates Sarah's life (the horror of the roundup, the stifling disorder of the Vel d'Hiv, the transport to Beaune-la-Rolande, the agonizing separation from her parents, Sarah's escape and refuge with an elderly couple [Niels Arestrup and Dominique Frot], and her tragic discovery of her little brother's remains) with Julia's increasing awareness. Her father-in-law Edouard Tézac (Michel Duchaussoy) discloses the family secret as Julia longs to know what has become of the little girl. This tightly-crafted thriller, contrasting the horrible chaos of little Sarah's life with the relative comfort of Julia's, leads her to Sarah's grown son William Rainsferd (Aidan Quinn), along with some sort of resolution to the problems in her own life. As for Sarah herself, flashbacks reveal a hauntingly exquisite, pensive teenage and adult Sarah (Charlotte Poutrel), deciding to leave France for a land where she can conceal her Jewish identity (because, we learn, she feels that being Jewish puts one in danger), and a definitively tragic end. It is this image of contemplative Sarah on the beach in Normandy and then in the States that hovers over the film's conclusion as Julia and William reconnect, each in their own way, with a distant past that now belongs to them.

Rose Bosch sees the Holocaust as having "universal echoes," reverberations beyond the question of race or religion. She wanted to incorporate the recognition, long acknowledged by historians, that the occupying Germans could not have succeeded in deporting 76,000 Jews without French participation. At the same time, since three quarters of French Jews survived, there had to be massive acts of individual resistance on a clandestine and unacknowledged level. This, combined with Bosch's desire to paint a broad canvas of ordinary Jewish life within which the sinister underpinnings of the organized genocide could teach us about resistance and moral authority, led to the alternation of vast scope and intimate vignettes that structures *La Rafle*. From the conference tables of Maréchal Pétain to negotiations between Prime Minister Laval, Chief of Police Bousquet, and the German officials, to home movies with Eva Braun and Hitler on the terraces of Berghof, the film moves deftly to the scenes of the vibrant Yiddish culture that Hitler wanted to annihilate. Bosch solved the problem of combining intimacy with objectivity, sensitivity with direct observation, by constructing a narrative about several Jewish families of Montmartre (where twenty-five percent of the Jewish children rounded up resided) and tracing the tragic consequences of the roundup and deportations through the fractured families and their suffering.

As the actual Joseph Weismann (who has a small speaking role in the film and who visited the set in a highly emotional encounter with the cast and crew) attests,

Bosch created a fiction inspired by his story; it is not his story exactly, but a narrative woven through the many stories Bosch found in her research. The veracity is obvious (though not to some critics, who find some scenes too emotional or contrived!), and every single episode could be documented if one chose to do the work.

Eleven-year-old Jo Weismann and his best friend Simon Zyglér do the best they can in occupied Paris, playing near the Sacré Coeur with Simon's little brother Nono (based on Annette Monod's "protégé," the five-year-old little boy who didn't want to go on the transport train without her), while Jo's parents Schmuël (Gad Elmaleh) and Sura (Raphaëlle Agogué) provide the kind of loving Jewish home that many survivors remember. Bella Zyglér (Sylvie Testud) and other mothers sit in the park until they are forced away ("*Interdit aux Juifs*") by a gendarme doing his duty, and the growing restrictions on Jews demoralize the population.

The raid produces the following: city buses packed with terrified Jews, the suffocating, unsanitary Vel d'Hiv, and the brutality in Beaune-la-Rolande. Annette Monod, newly graduated from nursing school, arrives to help the single Jewish doctor on the scene (Jean Reno). Dina Traube escapes the Vel d'Hiv thanks to the head plumber (another true account). Firemen arrive and, against orders, allow water to flow for the thirsty crowd; they take letters scrawled in panic, and post them the following day. Monod accompanies Doctor Scheinbaum to the Loiret camp, and witnesses the deportation first of the parents, and then of the children. Jo and a companion, Joseph Kogan, escape, as the last train filled with children crosses their path.

Paris, June 1945. The elegant Hotel Lutetia, with the tricolor proudly waving from its arch, is a makeshift reception center. Annette finds the miraculously returning Jo, and then sees the little Nono, now silent and traumatized, having been thrown from the train and found on the tracks. While some have criticized this ending as too sentimental, it is far from a resolution. The very last image of Jo's face by the carousel that opened the film in the relatively happy time before the raid, combined with the sadness of tiny Nono's face, both of whom have lost everyone, stands as both a harsh warning and an obligation to remember.

The populated diversity of *La Rafle*, with its effort to convey the culture, tradition, and practices of Jews suddenly disrupted by the raid, is everywhere apparent, while *Sarah's Key* suggests a solitary, reflective tone. Still, what the novel *Sarah's Key* lacks in terms of Jewish culture is provided in the film by Paquet-Brenner, who dedicates his film to relatives who perished in the Shoah. Two sequences that Paquet-Brenner added provide the much-needed Jewish context. There is a Yiddish song that Rachel, Sarah's partner in escape, sings in the camp, which



Joseph Weismann (Hugo Leverdez, center left), along with the rest of his family, is transported to the Beaune-La-Rolande camp in this scene from *La Rafle* (*The Roundup*).

transitions to the present, as Julia visits the Musée Memorial de la Shoah, and a sequence in which the teenage Sarah stares out at the D-Day beach while Chirac's speech in voice-over connects to Julia's office. Both sequences emphasize the particular Jewish nature of the tragedy through the use of sound, providing the cultural amplification barely alluded to in the novel.

As noted, *La Rafle* abounds in representations of Jewish culture, making the tragedy of the Vel d'Hiv inseparable from the genocide of the Shoah. Almost every survivor's testimony recalls the warmth and happiness of family life. Bosch includes Shabbat in the Weismann home, and again in the Vel d'Hiv. And once in the camp, Jo and his father share a twilight moment reminiscent of their Saturday evening on the Butte Montmartre before the chaos began. No image is more evocative of the shattered families of the Vel d'Hiv than little Nono running toward the transport truck in the Loiret in the belief that he is about to join his mother who has already been sent East.

Tourists in the Marais today are shown the building at 36, rue de Saintonge where the ghosts of Sarah Starzynski and her little brother haunt the imagination. Just down the street, at number 17, lived fifteen-year-old Hadassa Grynspan. Arrested in the same raid, she was deported from Pithiviers on convoy number fourteen of August 3, 1942, the second transport to leave from the Loiret with Jews from the Vel d'Hiv. Both *Sarah's Key* and *La Rafle* are necessary, if long awaited, explorations of this complex, disturbing history and its impact. Both are popular commercial releases that have taken on the mantle of historical reflection, each with a different emphasis.

To return to two actual people represented in *La Rafle*, to give them voice in response to the contemplative silence of the fictive Sarah, I have chosen two quotes. The first comes from Joseph Weismann: "They waged war against children because they were Jewish. Do you know of any civilization capable of such cruelty? It is inhuman to make children suffer so." And the next is from Annette Monod: "My whole life was overwhelmed and shaped by that roundup of the Vel d'Hiv, that has left so few traces in people's memory, about which they seldom speak.... People say, 'that was so long ago.' When I talk about my memories of the war, young people get bored. I'm done recounting. It's up to you now."

Both *Sarah's Key* and *La Rafle* have bravely answered this challenge across time and through the impossible space of silent years. Given the choice between an exquisitely tragic Jewess or the joyful, stylized colors of Jewish Montmartre gone dark, I can't say which is more effective in answering the call. Fortunately, we don't have to choose. Viewers can learn from and take solace in the hopeful vision that each film, in very different ways, presents.—Sandy Flitterman-Lewis

Neds

Produced by Conchita Airoidi, Olivier Delbosc, Alain de la Mata, Marc Missonnier, Peter Mullan and Lucinda Van Rie; directed by Peter Mullan; screenplay by Peter Mullan; cinematography by Roman Osin; production design by Mark Leese; costumes by Rhona Russell; edited by Colin Monie; music by Craig Armstrong; starring Conor McCarron, Peter Mullan, Greg Forrest, Joe Szula, Louise Goodall and Gary Milligan. Color, 120 min. A Tribeca Film release, www.tribecafilm.com, and available in DVD from New Video, www.newvideo.com.

Early on in *Neds*, Scottish filmmaker and actor Peter Mullan's third feature as writer/director, a young Glasgow woman lists some qualities that allegedly attract Americans to Scots: "We tell it like it is and we don't bow down to anyone." Her creator certainly puts that theory to the test. Mullan's depiction of his native city "like it was" in the early 1970s makes *The Wanderers* or *Gangs of New York* look like Brooklyn-based remakes of *Brideshead Revisited*. True to supposed national type, this filmmaker refuses to bow down to anyone or anything, bar the promptings of a fecund imagination and Brent Crude-black sense of humor. The results are neither for the squeamish nor for devotees of literary Naturalism. They make the present writer wonder if, before going any further, he ought to confess to being a recovering Glaswegian. The Glasgow of *Neds* is a place where kitchen knives slice bodies more often than bread, and where defenseless children wander unscathed through a pride of lions: imported big cats seem to know better than to tangle with indigenous small brats. Christ even comes down from the cross at one point, seeking a piece of the violent action, and getting stabbed by a glue-addled teen for his troubles. The Scottish Tourist Board can at least comfort itself with the knowledge that Mullan continues to live and work in his hometown. The director cannot be long for this earth as a result.



Ten-year-old John is lectured by his older brother Benny in Peter Mullan's *Neds*.

Neds tells a tale of good boy gone bad (or, perhaps, gone native). John McGill (Conor McCarron/Greg Forrest) is an intellectually gifted, ambitious child who at first strives earnestly to overcome the numerous personal and social obstacles he finds set in his way. For starters, John's family background is particularly troubled: the marriage of his mother (Louise Goodall) to an alcoholic verbal sadist of a husband (Peter Mullan) remains intact in name only, a concession to the social conservatism and orthodox Catholicism which form a large part of the wider cultural milieu sketched in elegantly and expressively by Mullan's film. John's older brother, Benny (Joe Szula), has already been expelled from school because he is an especially notorious member of one of Glasgow's many feral, and therefore feared, male teenage gangs. John's family background is thus one significant source of prejudice against him: the school headmaster initially denies him access to the institution's most prestigious class on the assumption that he will turn out just like his brother. The boy's socio-economic status is another: when bookish John finally makes a much-needed friendship outside of school, the connection is strangled at birth by a middle-class mother who considers the company of a working-class lad to be beneath her privileged, privately-educated son.

Fatally wounded by this rejection, John falls in with a local gang, becoming one of the eponymous neds (noneducated delinquents) of the film's title. If notoriety by proxy (his protected status as Benny's younger brother) is what initially gains the boy fast-track entry to the ranks, his discovery of a notable, but hitherto untapped, taste for violence rapidly cements his position. An initially intoxicating existence of drink and dope by day and running battles by night prompts John to leave behind all previous academic aspirations. But inability to control his impetuosity and bloodlust quickly sees him become even more alienated and isolated within his new world than he was inside his old. After nearly killing Canta (Gary Milligan), a boy who threatened him a couple of years before, John is ostracized by his delinquent peers. Increasingly unhinged as a result, he nearly bludgeons his father to death with a frying pan (*Neds*' rampaging teens generally arm themselves from their mothers' kitchens) and takes on a rival gang single-handedly in what looks very much like an unsuccessful suicide attempt. The film ends on an ambiguous symbolic note: when the van transporting John and other school kids through a local safari park breaks down, he and the now-brain-damaged Canta abscond, wandering away from camera through a field full of grazing lions.

American audience reactions to *Neds* may depend in large part upon a given individual's knowledge of, and taste in, contemporary British cinema. Fans of Loach, Leigh, and the British social-realist movement