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Review: A Cycle of Judicial Memory and Immoral Forgetting: Vel d'hiv 1942

Reviewed Work(s): Les Gens très bien (The Nice People) by Alexandre Jardin: Elle s'appelait Sarah (She Was Called Sarah) by Gilles Pequet-Brenner: Sarah's Key by Tatiana de Rosnay: La Rafle (The Round-Up) by Rose Bosch: "L'espace du mythe maréchaliste à Vichy 1940–1944" (The Space of the Marshall Myth in Vichy 1940–1944) by Robert Liris

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A Cycle of Judicial Memory and Immoral Forgetting: *Vel d'hiv* 1942

Review Essay: Novels, Films, Memoirs, Interviews

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Les Gens très bien (The Nice People), by Alexandre Jardin. Paris: Grasset, 2010.

Elle s'appelait Sarah (She Was Called Sarah), directed by Gilles Pequet-Brenner, 2011.

Sarah's Key, by Tatiana de Rosnay. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2007.

La Rafle (The Round-Up), directed by Rose Bosch, 2011.

"L'espace du mythe maréchaliste à Vichy 1940–1944" (The Space of the Marshall Myth in Vichy 1940–1944) by Robert Liris, *Mentalities/Mentalités*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (2009): 33–39.

Recreating and Recollecting an Historical Event

What happened in August 1942 to Jews in the *Vel d'hiv* (Vélodrome d'hiver or Winter Cycling Stadium) in one sense is not in controversy; the event does not raise the voices of deniers as does the Holocaust itself; and no one tries to

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trivialize the arrest, deportation, and execution of more than thirteen thousand French men, women, and children.¹ Though until very recently, no one in France liked to talk about it because this *rafle* or round-up involved ordinary Parisian gendarmes, bus drivers, and other civic officials of the collaborationist government under Nazi occupation, along with those French bureaucrats working for the Vichy regime of Marshall Pétain to the south. It was known to have happened. But the exact details were apparently lost: lost because the Germans unusually for them did not keep accurate records, including photographs and other plans. Lost because what material evidence (*realia*) that lasted was later destroyed or interfered with after the war, such as the velodrome itself, which was torn down, and the holding camps outside of Paris, bulldozed away or transformed into something seemingly innocuous; and it is charged that even General Charles de Gaulle, when he later came to power, had the few remaining photographs airbrushed so that French police officers were removed and the round-up presented as an all-German operation. Lost too because virtually all Jews who passed through the *action* did not survive, and those few Jews who did were mostly so young at the time they could not present substantial reports. Rose Bosch, the director of the film *La Rafle*, says the number of returnees was only 25.² Ordinary non-Jewish citizens of France pretended they could not remember, claimed not to know anyone who did recall, and resisted attempts to help them recollect. Anyone who did collaborate with the Nazis in this affair must have been a monster, the feeling went, and therefore the individuals who collaborated and did not seem like monsters could neither have known nor participated in the business. A vicious circle. Gendarmes, neighbors, passersby on the street, no one could bring to mind such an event happening, though they did not deny that it must have happened; it is not something nice to talk about. In time, of course, most French people did really forget, and the teachers and school textbooks forgot to remind them.

Perhaps, as Rose Bosch told Simon Round in an interview for the British Jewish Chronicle, “France was the only country in Europe which sent thou-

¹Alexandre Jardin told Emma-Kate Symons in an interview that the exact numbers were 12,884 Jews, including 4,051 children (“Vichy’s ‘Very Nice People,’” *The Wall Street Journal*, 26 March 2011, online at online.wsj.com/.../SB10001424052748703858404576214741442415776 [seen 13/06/2011]).

²Simon Round, “The Day France Betrayed its Jews,” *Jewish Chronicle* (10 June 2011), online at <http://www.thejc.com/arts/film/5004/the-day-france-betrayed-its-jews> (seen 14 June 2011).

sands of unaccompanied children on trains to the death camps,” adding that “[w]hen they arrived at Auschwitz they were either marched to the gas chambers or machine-gunned to death.”³ Not only that, most French people do not realize either that there were over two hundred internment camps on their national territory or that Marshal Petain’s embarrassingly naive and almost comical government took an active part in the deportation and murder of Jews, often without any demands coming from the Germans.⁴ To accept as a judicial memory and a moral fact these aspects of French history is, of course, difficult, even for those not directly culpable, particularly children and grandchildren of those who were participants in the crimes or passive witnesses, because such matters are immensely shameful and depressing. Those who deliberately suppress the memories, keeping it from their families and the general public, may do so for malicious reasons: to protect themselves from answering to the court of history, if not to some more immediate judicial charges. Others keep silence, destroy evidence, and paper over the cracks with sweet tales of heroism and charity because they believe it is better for the young people and for the national psyche. Georges Palante wrote in 1914 about the imbecility and banality of a “misanthropic pessimism,” meaning a view of people as too stupid to understand the real griminess of the world and therefore incapable of shouldering any responsibility for making things better.⁵ Anatole France’s character Dr. Trublet in *A Mummer’s Tale* is cited by Palante as pointing out that “stupidity is the first good of an ordered society.” How does one wake up a nation from such moral turpitude?

New Films, Novels, Memoirs and Reactions

Several novels, films, and historical memoirs have started to appear recently which deal with the round-up of 16 and 17 July 1942, especially following Jacques Chirac’s speech of memoriam for the thirteen thousand murdered with French complicity. But without much documentation and without photographic or cinematographic evidence, how does one recapture the lost images and voices, the press and smell of so many human bodies cramped into one sports arena, the anguish of parents separated from their children, people so

³Round, “The Day France Betrayed its Jews.”

⁴Round, “The Day France Betrayed its Jews.”

⁵Georges Palante, “Misanthropic Pessimism,” trans. Mitch Abidot from *Pessimisme et individualisme* (Paris : Alcan, 1914); this extract available online at www.marxists.org/archive/palante/1914/misanthropy.htm (seen 13/06/2011).

desperate they leap from the balconies of the velodrome, or waste away from hunger and disease? The operation was so elaborate and involved so much coordination to effect in relative silence through the city streets of Paris, that the memories of eye-witnesses must have been hidden somewhere over half a century or more. Do they still lie dormant? Are they festering in many people's hearts and souls? How does one find out? The books and films address different aspects of these questions. Some try to imagine what the *rafle* looked, felt, and sounded like. Some try to grasp its consequences in the shorter and longer term. Others ask who actually was responsible for the French participation, from collaborator members of the government in Paris and in Vichy, to the man and woman in the street who observed and benefited from the confiscation of household goods, the freeing up of scarce apartments, and the opening of jobs, along with the policemen assigned to knock on doors or guard the bicycle stadium or the trains or the holding camps. Some actually try to reconstruct the scenes of people, places, and events; others to imagine the feelings, thoughts, and private actions of those directly and indirectly involved. Granted the paucity of documents, pictures, and official memoirs, the effort of imagining and reconstruction has to involve the imagination, memory as a creative and critical instrument. In response to these creative imaginings, the responses have been varied: if not outright denials, then questions, challenges, and corrections, and with various levels of intellectual intensity and emotional energy.

Much of this response to the breakdown of official and private memory reverberates throughout the new non-fictional book by the popular French novelist Alexandre Jardin, whose *Les gens très bien* (The Nice People) can be contextualized by readings of Robert Liris' own psychohistorical reflections on growing up in Vichy during the Pétainist regime, as well as by viewing the feature film *Elle s'appelait Sarah* (She Was Called Sarah)⁶ based rather closely on the original English novel by Tatiana de Rosnay known as *Sarah's Key*. Another contemporary film not only deals with the same historical event of the round-up of Jews on 16 July 1942 but often seems to use what seem like exactly the same cinematic reconstructions as *Elle s'appelait Sarah*. Rose Bosch's *La Rafle* (The Round Up), however, is based on the life of a true character, Joseph Weisman (played by Gad Elmaleh), who managed to escape and tell his tale.

This Gaumont and Légende film also focuses on Dr. Sheinbaum (played by Jean Reno) who "does what he can for the welfare of those around him" in the

⁶Advertising booklet distributed by Madman.co.nz/incinemas (2011). "Stéphane Marsil presents *Sarah's Key*." Directed by Gilles Paquet-Brenner and starring Kristin Scott Thomas as the narrator Julia Jarmond and Mélusine Mayance as the young Sarah Starzyhski.

velodrome, and “Annette Monod ([played by] Mélanie Laurent), a protestant [sic] Red Cross nurse, [who] is appalled by what is occurring and she attempts to provide aid to the Jews as their ordeal continues.”⁷ Already it should be clear that the categories of fiction and history are not mutually exclusive when it comes to reproducing the truth, and books and films that present themselves in a more documentary style may raise more serious criticism than those circulated as entertainment.

Unlike many other recent novels, feature films, documentaries, and histories which focus on the individuals and families caught up in this horrendous crime against French Jews, Alexandre Jardin’s confessional narrative is concerned with the way his grandfather Jean, his father Paul, and for many years he himself denied or obfuscated the role of Jean Jardin in the round up of more than thirteen thousand Jewish men, women, and children in preparation for their deportation to the death camps to the east, such as Auschwitz. While always knowing his grandfather Jean Jardin was a close assistant of Marshall Pétain’s Vichy President Laval at the time of the *raffle*, neither Alexandre nor anyone else suspected what that role actually meant, especially as the older man had been acquitted by a French court shortly after the war and the other members of the older generations of the family did all they could to minimize his complicity and divert attention onto the German officials. Another son of Jean Jardin, Gabriel, vigorously denies the accusations made by his nephew Alexandre and has compiled a list of twenty-four verifiable assertions, by written record and witness testimony, to prove his father was not culpable and was in fact a friend to many Jews, an agent who aided the Allies defeat the Nazis, and an official without any influence on the decisions made by those who actively worked with the Occupying powers to organize and carry out the round up in July 1942.⁸

⁷Cited from the film brochure provided by www.sharmifulfilms.com.au (seen 1 May 2011). In fact, this advertising booklet claims that “[a]ll the characters in this film are real” and “[a]ll the events, even the most extreme, really took place.” We are told that the “screenplay of *The Round Up* is “based closely on the experiences of Joseph Weisman” and that Weisman praised Rose Bosch for how well she was able to portray these events on film. But is a non-witness able to represent the historical actions perfectly, an exact mimesis of something that no one else has been able or willing to remember? That ability is one of the definitions both of superstition and of art.

⁸Gabriel Jardin, “Jean Jardin (1904–1976): son rôle pendant l’occupation” (January 2011), online at <http://www.jeanjardin.com/roledependantoccu/index> (seen 13 June 2011).

e memoir therefore works in two parallel lines—and in that it is similar to *Sarah's Key*, the novel and the film, insofar as it gradually reveals how the grandson came to discover the true history of his grandfather's and his father's deliberate attempts to mask the antisemitism and active complicity of the French, both in Paris and in Vichy; and the transformation of Alexandre's own life as a consequence, including his conversion to Judaism. *The Nice People*, then, is about memory, prejudice, and moral corruption, as well as about the need to make amends and to re-evaluate one's whole view of life and history. In a subordinate way, though hardly insignificant, the book is also about what it means "to honor thy father and thy mother." Rather than a blind obedience and acceptance of what the elders in the family say and a sense of duty in protecting family honor at the expense of honesty and morality, Jardin's confessional narrative takes the rabbinical position of seeing "honor" as consisting in facing up to realities and making one's parents and grandparents stand in the light of truth and justice. In a way, too, it is about how to read texts properly, the oral traditions of a family history that distort the truth, the books written to trivialize and distort the realities of both the past crimes and the present bigotry, and the texts one writes oneself out of misguided intentions and false interpretations of the events in one's formative years before the development of rational and critical faculties.

Right Memories and the Right to Remember

ough there are some disparaging remarks about a genre of literature developed by the grandchildren of *collabos*, the collaborators during the Nazi occupation of the northern area and the Vichy regime in the south of France, Alexandre Jardin answers the specific challenges we will see raised by Ursula Duba and actually goes beyond any superficial considerations. His book can stand as a touchstone to the aesthetic and moral problems raised by the other representations of the events at the *vel d'hiv* in late July 1942. Why, when and how does one represent or reconstruct events in the past that have been virtually erased from a national consciousness, have been distorted by the passage of time, and have been deliberately distorted by guilty parties or their dupes? To take a few steps further, we need to ask: When do fiction and other artistic techniques become more vivid, truthful, and morally responsible than fragmentary, painfully emotive, and naïve memories?

De Rosnay's novel is a fiction based on historical facts, at least in that portion of the novel that describes how an eleven-year-old girl and her Polish refugee family are caught up on the fateful days in July 1942 in Paris, with harrowing scenes of the round-up, the forced incarceration of huge crowds in the winter velodrome for several days, and then the train rides, separations,

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and further deportations to Auschwitz. The other part of the novel—much more proportionately than in the film version—focuses on contemporary time, when an American magazine reporter, the narrator of the novel, gradually uncovers the history of Sarah during and after the *rafle*, this intellectual quest forming an increasingly central part in her own domestic life, including a decision not to abort her child conceived with difficulty in middle age, the break-up with her French husband, and the return to live in New York with an older daughter and the new infant. In an interview, de Rosnay assured her questioner that “ces personnages sortent de mon imagination,” even the figure of the Julia Jarmand narrator who plays such a large part in the novel.⁹ She further explains that she needed a year of research in books and in the field to find out the background details of the historical circumstances and that the title was a decision of her editors, and she gives a list of the authors, French and English, she most enjoys and learns from.

In a sense, these authorial disclosures are not very reassuring; going from no knowledge at all of the *vel d’hiv* to writing an important popular novel that has become a very popular film in such a brief period of time suggests rather limited contextual understanding or deep reflection on the aesthetic and moral issues raised. In fact, it is quite a disingenuous statement, as Rose Bosch, herself also not a Jew, said in an interview of working five years to prepare her film *The Round-Up*.¹⁰

Focus and Fiction

Another important factor to consider is the relationship of the primary focus of a novel or a popular feature film and its historical base. Moving as both de Rosnay’s novel *Sarah’s Key* and the film version *Elle s’appelaït Sarah* are, what depths there are lie more in the modern situation of the narrator Julia Jarmand’s relationship with her Parisian husband and her pondering the options of having a child in her middle age, at the risk of her health and the stability of her marriage, and only secondarily in the journalistic ethics of pursuing the story of Sarah Starzynski’s life after she is adopted by the French farming family and her move to the United States. Whereas the novel tends to move from the alternating chapters of the narrator’s present and Sarah’s past on the

⁹ The interview is conducted anonymously with the *Foire aux questions* online (FAQ) and appears in French and English; available online at http://www.tatianaderosnay.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=59 (seen 05/05/2011).

¹⁰Round, “The Day France Betrayed its Jews.”

day of the round-up and afterwards, into the modern search for Sarah's identity and the engagement of the narrator with her American husband and children, the film does maintain a more sustained balance and lingers longer over the ramifications of Sarah's ultimate (though hushed-up) suicide rather than the domestic relations of the narrator. Neither, though, does more than hint at any specifically Jewish themes or characteristics in Sarah and her family, nor explore the political implications of the suppressed memories, what Frank Haldemann,¹¹ following Avishai Margalit,¹² calls "judicial memory." In other words, memory is not a neutral term to designate a place where recollections are stored in an individual mind or a collective consciousness, whether archived in documents or taught as an official history. It is, on the one hand, a legal term that categorizes the place, the rules of debate, the individuals who argue from evidence and interpretation of testimony, so as to decide, once a case is made for a crime's having been committed, on a distribution of guilt and innocence; and on the other hand, a moral or ethical marker of responsibilities and the need for corrective, ameliorative, or punitive actions. Such thinking takes the simplistic idea of "truth" as a cultural construct, with its post-modernist attitude of multiple variations of veracity, allowing significant differences according to the power and hurt of the interested parties, several steps into mature consideration. It also moves past the deterministic ideology of post-colonial thinking in which all narratives of struggle are equal, all journeys truthful when they liberate the oppressed, and no grand narrative of human development allowed to incorporate all peoples or individuals. As in a midrashic mentality, there is always a single powerful creative truth out of which history plays itself through group and individual experience; a truth various in its articulation and application, but always subject to questioning what happened and who is responsible, to challenge concerning its significance and motivations, to legal status depending on contexts and analogies and their impact and permeability to persons, places, circumstances and consequences, and to aesthetics in regard to the strength of its visibility and the vividness of its memorableness as a representation of truth.

¹¹Frank Haldemann, "A Different Kind of Justice: Transitional Justice as Recognition," *Global Fellows Forum*, NYU School of Law online at http://www.law.nyu.edu/idcplg?IdcService=GetFile&DocName=ECM_DLM_013773&RevisionSelectionMethod=LatestReleased (seen 25 May 2011) pp.3–6.

¹²Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory* (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 7.

What keys de Rosnay's novel about Sarah and the film based on it to Alexandre Jardin's autobiography is the concern for facing up to or discovering lost memories and the moral crises the process entails. Robert Liris's memories are different, in the sense that he knows all along that he was a small child growing up in the spa city of Vichy and saw and heard things about the Vichy regime he was too young at the time to understand. He is not fighting against the grain to bring matters into focus, but uses his mature insights as a psychohistorian to adjust his memories to the implications they hold and to recall what his parents and family friends were saying then with the knowledge of a man in his late seventies.

In order to understand in context the significance of Jardin's biographical and confessional book, Rosnay's novel, and the film made from it, and Liris's very personal memoirs of Pétainist Vichy, let us cite Ursula Duba on how the grandchildren of German Nazis confront their own family histories:

As usual, the purported guilt this 3rd generation of mass murderers or other murderers is wallowing in, is all about themselves. Where is the sorrow for the victims of their murderous grandfathers? Where is the sorrow for the horrific pain and suffering their grandfathers inflicted on the victims? Where is the sorrow for those victims who witnessed yet survived the horrors and who continue to be haunted by nightmares? Where is the sorrow for the children of the survivors who have known ever since they were small children that their parents had endured horrendous suffering? Where is the sorrow for the survivors whose parents, aunts and uncles and cousins were murdered? Where is the sorrow of the children of survivors who don't have aunts and uncles or cousins and will never know whose disposition or talents they inherited? Where is the sorrow for the children of survivors who will never know their family's medical history and who feel they are sitting on a time bomb?¹³

She then adds, tellingly:

My own experience among many Germans has repeatedly been that they don't know the difference between feeling guilty—for something they haven't done—and the expression of sorrow.

Ursula Duba, who is not Jewish, was born in Germany in 1939 and has lived in the USA for more than thirty years, making a name for herself through books, poetry, and lectures on the obtuseness of her former countrymen and women in regard to the Holocaust and the Jews. Clearly what bothers Duba

¹³In this posting on East European Jewish History (eejh@yahoogroups.com on behalf of duba on 29 May 2011) she cites her own book, *Tales from a Child of the Enemy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997).

most is not so much the silence or the misunderstanding, honest and affected, but the absence of compassion or empathy in the descendants of the Nazi generation who perpetrated the Holocaust against the Jews. For while they present themselves as victims of what their grandparents—and in some cases, their parents—did, and consequently feel themselves also to be survivors of these terrible crimes, they do not seem adequately aware of the enormity of the Holocaust as not just a crime against humanity but as an enduring crime against the Jewish people as a whole and of each and every individual Jew who was murdered or who suffered traumatic losses in this act of genocide. Even when these Germans conceive of themselves as survivors and participate in occasions alongside the children and grandchildren of the Jewish survivors, they fail to realize their own moral responsibilities individually and collectively—not as perpetrators themselves, but as bearers of the memories of what was done on their behalf by the rulers of the One Thousand Year Reich, of stored recollections of how and why the crimes were committed, and of the obligation to grieve on behalf of the real victims. If their guilt is not for the acts themselves, they are for the consequences of those actions. They remain as witnesses to their families and to their nation, as well as to the rest of the world—and always to the Jewish people in memory and in history—to how the Holocaust must not be forgotten, trivialized, or used maliciously, or even unconsciously, to perpetuate the same old hatreds and indifference which led to the Shoah.

In the case of Jardin, however, the story he tells is of how he had to fight against the conspiracies of silence and of noise that prevented him—and the rest of the world—from appreciating fully the extent in which his grandfather was actively collusive in the organization of the round-up in Paris in 1942. He came to realize with great difficulty how his grandparents and also parents had distorted his life to make him act, say, and write things that were hurtful to others and to himself, and he had to learn to turn sentimentality, nostalgia, and discomfort into something more positive. Turning his whole life around, he became a Jew himself, a conversion not based on guilt or shame, but from a profound re-orientation of his emotional and intellectual being. None of the reviewers I have found seem to see this conversion as one of the key points in *Les gens très bien*—or even to recognize that it happens at all. Yet, as will be shown later, it provides some of the most important chapters in the book in terms of Jardin's own transformed outlook on life in general and on his own family. It certainly distinguishes him from either the grandchildren of French

collabos or those of Nazi officials in Germany and other occupied states. He does not seek to exploit feelings of sympathy, guilt, pity, or admiration in his audience, but rather presents himself as someone who needed to fight within himself for a long time to see the Jardin family for what it was during the War and very much remained even to the time of Jean Jardin's death in 1976 and beyond, a struggle Alexandre could not win until he ceased being one of them. His mental and emotional journey has implications for the rest of the French, who have not been able to face up to their own past, and the parents and grandparents who, while not monsters, were not "nice people" or "marionettes"—helpless victims and ignorant bystanders—not responsible for what happened.¹⁴

In her novel, Tatiana de Rosnay follows several intertwined stories, each of which raises more questions than she seems capable of answering or being aware of fully. To the extent to which she sets out the details of historical events of the *rafle*, the incarcerations and the deportations, she can be vivid and cogent. Without photographs or documentary films of the Jews inside the *vel d'hiv* on those fateful July days of 1942, her novel paints powerful word-pictures, more by implication in the novel itself and even more powerfully in the cinematic version of her fiction. Without actual contemporary images, the scene has to be reconstructed from the cold extant documents, from a few difficult memories of survivors, most now only from elderly persons who were at the time young children too frightened and confused to realize what was happening around them, and from ordinary French men and women who saw and heard the scene but were either too frightened, indifferent, or collusive to speak of it clearly as it happened or afterwards. Very soon, it seems, for most people, including the neighbors of the Jews arrested or those living near the velodrome, the policemen and railway workers, and certainly the collaborators involved in coordinating events with the Nazi officials, the whole event was pushed into the background of collective silence, and so became part of the great national amnesia concerning almost everything about French participation in the Holocaust, both in the occupied zone of the north and the Vichy regime in the south.

While for the Jardin family the structural amnesia was deliberately held together to protect themselves from shame and prosecution, for little people in

¹⁴Yves Pourcher, "Jean Jardin était une marionnette," *Le nouvel observateur* (7 January 2011) online at bibliobs.nouvelobs.com > Documents (seen 13/06/2011). Pourcher is the author of *Pierre Laval vu par sa fille* (Paris: La Cherche Midi, 2002).

de Rosnay *Sarah's Key* the suppression of memories is locked into the complications of inter-generational shame and guilt, sometimes out of the best of motives—to protect someone like the grandmother of the family that moves into the flat previously lived in by the Polish Jews—but more often to hide weakness and selfishness. As the narrator of the novel and the movie tries to trace the whereabouts of Sarah, who had been able to escape from the transit camp and was taken in by a farm family and treated lovingly as their own daughter, she begins to widen the scope of her search, discovering people connected to the young woman's new life in America who were completely unaware of what her background and theirs was—or who tried to keep her background as a Jewish survivor of the Holocaust a secret to protect her memory and shield their own children from the subsequent actions of Sarah. The narrator thus encounters a variety of brick walls, persons who really do not know who and what Sarah was and what happened to her and others who know some details but not all and cannot imagine or want to imagine how the pieces fit together. Except in regard to Sarah herself, whom the narrator imagines as asking her parents why Jews are treated differently than other people, the whole problem of antisemitism is not broached in either novel or film. The question of why Jews suffered the way they did and behaved in different ways as Jews does not figure at all, even amongst Sarah's American family and their children. There is no reflection in them either on what it was like to be a Jew in the time of persecution or what it might mean to discover that through one's mother one is halachically a Jew. The focus turns on good Gentiles—the policeman who helps Sarah escape from the transit camp, the farming family that shields her throughout the war, the Parisian family that inherits her apartment and provides money to the farming family to help her until the time she grows up and leaves for America—but there is no discussion as to why these people act in a kind and generous way while most Frenchmen and women avert their eyes or smile smugly at the victims of genocidal laws and actions.

Like those earnest young people who silently and seriously walk around the exhibitions in memory of Anne Frank and then write in the visitors' album about peace, love, and good will to men, the novel and film cannot grasp what Ursula Duba sees so glaringly missing in the sentimental tears of self-pity amongst the grandchildren of Nazis. Or what Alexandre Jardin finally makes himself see in his once respected and beloved grandparents and parents: the latency of evil. Or even, if we may use a phrase used to designate Adolf Hit-

ler as a painter of postcard art, “immoral imagination,”¹⁵ that is, the skill and ingenuity to create false identities and to recast one’s life in a different light, hence with different “impressions,” than that which historically obtained. It is, in fact, only recently that details of how actively collusive the French were in the Holocaust has become available. In October 2010 the noted anti-Nazi lawyer Serge Klausfeld, on behalf of an anonymous donor, deposited in the Shoah Memorial in Paris a document dated October 1940, in which with his own hand the head of the Vichy regime crossed out the qualifying phrase in the German order for deportation of Jews that would have exempted those naturalized before 1860, thus ensuring that all Jewish citizens of France, as well as more recent refugees from the Third Reich, would be sent to the extermination camps in the East. This shows that Pétain personally hardened the already despicable anti-Jewish directives, and because of that it is more than ever difficult to dismiss the nagging suspicion that there was more antisemitism in the soil of France than French pride wants to accept.¹⁶

¹⁵Marc Fisher, “The Paintings of Adolf Hitler,” Part II, International Campaign for Real History, *The Washington Post* (21 April 2002) online at www.snyderstreasures.com/pages/postarticle.htm (seen 13/06/2011).

¹⁶“Comment Pétain a durci le statut des juifs d’octobre 1940,” *Liberation.fr* (4 October 2010) online at <http://www.liberation.fr/politiques/1012293934-comment-petain-a-durci-le-statut...> (read 4/10/10); the original article appeared on the Associated Press (AP) wire service an abbreviated version and without photographic reproduction of the document, which was printed in *The New Zealand Herald* on 5 October 2010 under the title “French Role in Holocaust.” Further details appear in the report by Deborah Lauter, “Draft of anti-Jewish measure changing views of Vichy head” (6 October 2010, *Jewish Telegraphic Agency* online at <http://www.jta.org/news/article-print/1010/10/06/2741166/draft-of-anti-jewish-me...> (read 8.10/10); this version emphasizes questions raised by “younger historians” on the integrity of the handwritten comments changing the “Statute of Jews.” According to Lauter, “Historians do not contest the authenticity of the document, but experts disagree on who authored the *dits*. Did Pétain himself handwrite the corrections, providing unprecedented confirmation and new clues about the Vichy leader’s personal anti-Semitic zeal? Or did technocrats simply jot down demands from one or several other leaders bent on toughening the text during a Cabinet meeting devoted to the law two days before its enactment?” Serge Klausfeld believes the changes stem from Pétain himself. But another objection lies in the anonymity of the gift of this document to the Paris Holocaust Museum, since in matters such as this provenance is a key factor. Moreover, “Even if it was the hand of Pétain himself, objects Annette Wiewiorka, “we don’t have information on the conditions in which he made these corrections to the statute. . . . We don’t know if he was alone, or if it’s his own work.” Though these doubts may seem legitimate, particularly in the light of all the forgeries, perjuries, misappropriations, and other duplicities riddling the Dreyfus Affair, there is a point at which “deconstruction” goes too far and the truth is

the older relatives of Alexandre Jardin presented themselves, and perhaps actually believed they were, among “the nice people” (*les gens très bien*) who “went along” with Marshall Pétain and the other Nazi collaborators because they either did not know the ultimate destination of the trains departing to so-called work-camps, felt that their cooperation was a duty to help preserve French dignity and integrity under difficult circumstances, or believed they had no choice under the German occupation.

History of the Holocaust With or Without Jews

As we indicated above, the producers of the near-documentary *La Rafle* claim at the same time to base all the characters and events on actual persons and historical actions and to “follow[] the events through the eyes of a group of young children,” something the chief surviving witness, Joseph Weismann, said in 1995 when the project was first mooted: “I don’t think that anyone would ever dare.”¹⁷ The key aesthetic question, which is also a moral problem, is not just whether anyone, French or other, would take up the challenge and have the courage to produce such a film, but what the relationship of an artistic imitation is to reality. Rose Busch, the producer, points out that one of the very few contemporary photographs of the transit camps in which the thirteen thousand Jewish men, women, and children passed was “doctored” by the De Gaulle government “to remove the clearly Gallic presence of a gendarme,” so that it would appear that the entire operation was conducted, from inception to execution, by the German Nazi occupiers. Until Jacques Chirac broke the code of silence in 1995, the official version of history and thus the popular understanding of this event erased French complicity. But even then, as we had to wait for Alexandre Jardin’s autobiographical book to show, French involvement was not passive or reluctant, but active and formative. Moreover, as *Les gens très bien* reveals, it was possible for the most insidious of the Pétainists to paint themselves as unwilling collaborators in this massacre of the innocents, to fool more than the government officials, politicians, journalists, and ordinary people of France, who, it would seem, were willing to be fooled, but

lost in a fog of quibbles, or what is called “immoral imagination” or “satanic midrashim.” See Norman Simms, “Satanic Midrashim: or, The Abuse of History” *Mentalities/Mentalités* 21:1 (2007): 32–47.

¹⁷Lizzy Devin, “La Rafle confronts wartime stain on French history,” *The Guardian* (9 March 2010) online at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/mar/09/la-rafle-film-france-war> (seen 05/05/2011).

also their own children and grandchildren, who resisted accepting the truth when it started to become inexorably evident. Further, as we see in de Rosnay's novel and in the film version, while the facts of French collaboration can be shown, the emphasis of the artistic representation can tilt towards exoneration through the depiction of good Gentile men and women, with minimal attention to the Jewish identity of the title character's Jewish family or background.