

Holding On and Holding Out: Jewish Diaries from Wartime France

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For several decades now, historians have expanded their methods and approaches to the past, with personal narratives—not least of “ordinary people”—playing an increasingly important role. For studies of the Second World War, the integration of diaries, memoirs, testimonies, and oral interviews has become almost *de rigueur*. Histories of Vichy France are no different, and studies of the Nazi occupation of France from 1940 to 1944 are peppered with individual voices. They inject a level of humanity, dynamism, and insight which other sources cannot recreate.

As a historian of Vichy France, I picked up Anne Freadman’s book expecting to find a story of how Jews in France lived in this period through the content of their diaries. I quickly realised that this was not the case. Freadman is, above all, interested in the practice of diary-writing, and in this case diary-writing in times of crisis. This is a fascinating angle, and her book is engrossing, emotional, and enlightening. Diaries, Freadman argues, are an account of the self in time, a unique genre which is unlike any other form of personal narrative. Whereas autobiographies or memoirs look back at events, diarists are living through them, with no sense of how it will all end. They write as they are living, making their writing a dynamic interaction between what they are going through, how they reflect on it (as well as the past and the future), and how they see themselves. What Freadman points to is a dynamic form of writing and reflection which, when closely analysed, is like a magnifying glass onto personal development during years of upheaval and uncertainty; a magnifying glass which allows us to follow the diarist’s “story of the self through time and history” (11). Diaries have different purposes—at times to bear witness, at times to ground, at times to resist—but it is always a practice of the self.

The crisis of self which Jews experienced in France during the war makes this a particularly interesting case study. France was the first country to fully emancipate Jews at the time of the revolution, but after the German invasion of France in May 1940 and the agreement to Franco-German collaboration in June 1940, the status of Jews in France would significantly change. (There had, of course, been ongoing antisemitism in France like in the rest of Europe. The eruption of the Dreyfus Affair in the late nineteenth century was a pivotal moment.) There was, on the one hand, the Nazi legislation enforced in the Occupied Zone, and on the other the antisemitic legislation of the French government in Vichy enforced in the Free Zone. Between 1940 and 1944, Jews were banned from the professions, stripped of their nationality, prevented from accessing certain public spaces, made to register with the authorities, expropriated, humiliated, interned in camps, killed, and deported to concentration and extermination camps. Of the 300,000 Jews living in France in 1939, over 75,000 would be deported to the East, of whom barely 2000 returned. But within these numbers there was not a single story of Jews in France. Instead, there were thousands of stories, stories which were shaped by social, cultural, economic, and political backgrounds but also mainly by national backgrounds, with a strong distinction between French Jews and foreign Jews. The waves of persecution affected French and non-French Jews differently, and even within the Jewish community itself there was animosity and tensions between those Jews who considered themselves *français de souche*, and those who were foreign, either

because they had recently arrived from Central and East Europe or because they had just been stripped of their nationality.

These events greatly affected how Jews saw themselves during those years. The question of multiple Jewish identities existing in Vichy France is something historians have already written about, but here it is further complicated, further broken down by Freadman's ability to capture the internal struggles and shifts of the individual diarists. Freadman carries out a very careful study of several diaries, some of which are already familiar to historians of Vichy France. In the first and fourth chapters she examines several at the same time, introducing a number of characters in order to explore how narratives of identity and time develop within the pages of their diaries. In the middle chapters, she zooms in on two diaries to explore these themes of self and time: first, that of Raymond-Raoul Lambert, a well-integrated French Jew who wrote a diary whilst he was president of the Vichy-organised Union Général des Israélites de France (UGIF), the official organisation representing Jews during the occupation. The second was that of Benjamin Schatzman, a dentist born in Palestine who had emigrated to France and kept a diary whilst he was interned during the occupation.

If both men were well-educated, the contexts in which they wrote their diaries were radically different: one was rubbing shoulders with Vichy politicians whilst trying to represent the Jewish community; the other was in an internment camp. These different experiences mean that the practice of keeping a diary was different for each one. In his diary, Lambert for a long time rehearsed his Frenchness, a desire to maintain his French identity whilst it was being so fundamentally questioned and eventually denied by Vichy. A close study of the word "we," however, shows how this changed over time. When Lambert started to write his diary, he used "we" in reference to French people, including French Jews. As the diary continues, however, he started to use "we" to refer to the broader Jewish community, including foreigners. Lambert's feelings of self and identity are *visibly* shifting in this period. Meanwhile, Schatzman's physical practice of keeping a regular diary is a form of survival. Interned, his sense of time is suspended. And yet he keeps this diary, a way to ground himself, to recognise himself. What do diaries *do*? Here, when everything else is collapsing, unrecognisable, and beyond the diarists' control, they suspend time and help to save fragments of the self.

Throughout the chapters, Freadman lingers over the diary entries. In addition to her own careful, close, and sensitive reading of these texts, she integrates numerous extracts and quotes throughout, making them come to life. She keeps the original French quotes in the main text in addition to the English translation, a way to retain the original text and meaning which can be too easily lost in translation. By lingering, she allows us to truly pause to think about the vitality and power of these sources, in that the diaries too have an effect on the diarist as they are living through history. It would be interesting to apply a similar methodological and theoretical framework to non-Jewish diaries in Vichy France, or a broader close reading of Jewish diaries in other parts of Europe.

Freadman does not offer a single conclusion and refers to Michael Marrus's reluctance to draw specific lessons from history. I could not agree more. What her work makes historians think about seriously is how diaries are laboratories of the self, dynamic sources where historical actors could continue, develop, rehearse, practice, or ground their sense of self when the world around them denied it to them. In diaries, they could also "play a trick on time" (200), the present blurring both the past and the future. Personal understandings of time emerge repeatedly in the diaries, challenging and refuting the force of history which was otherwise marching on. Lambert, Schatzman, and many of the diarists Freadman mentions were deported to, and murdered in, Auschwitz. But in Vichy France, through their diaries, they were holding on, and holding out.