

Paris-Tel Aviv: Forgetting as Memory

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The definition of collective identity has been at the heart of our *fin de siècle*'s preoccupations. Compounded by successive waves of human migration, the urgency of this concern has bestowed a new legitimacy upon a project of classification that the Enlightenment had all but disavowed (race, class, nation, political allegiance, and the all-pervasive but badly defined ethnicity—a list to which our generation has added gender and sexual orientation). Each of today's self-defined groups determines a political and epistemological agenda that spills over from the national or even international scenes to fuel our academic institutional quarrels. In France, as the Empire crumbled in the aftermath of World War II, decolonization exacerbated old conflicts over national identity and has since brought the very notion of nationhood under painful scrutiny. Today, the same conflicts have swollen the ranks of the extreme rightist, anti-immigration Front National lead by Jean-Marie Le Pen. The roots of the fundamental national discord that led to the success of the Front National are found in earlier times, however, in the crisis that did the most to elaborate the French notion of nationhood: the French Revolution, which redefined both the concept of Man and that of State. Predictably, the relationship between State and Man evolved over time (the process is still going on). In the nineteenth century, conflicts over the nature of France's national identity largely determined the political programs that pitted against each other three republics, two empires, one monarchy, and a Catholic Church eager to regain its control over the state (the Dreyfus affair constitutes one of the high points of this conflict). Any attempt to understand modern France's political and national *imaginaire* outside the framework of these conflicts runs the risk of imposing foreign concepts

on a specifically French context. This holds especially true for the much debated set of questions that have come to be labeled "identity politics," and that constitute today some of the major misunderstandings between Frenchmen and Americans, even as they share progressive and "liberal" views.

The first modern document that defines the rights and obligation of a minority in France was the *Décret d'émancipation des Juifs* (The Decree Emancipating Jews)—and it did so by pointedly denying them the status of "minority." At the same time, since Jews are the only minority whose presence is recorded in France since the Gaullic era and whose history, *qua* minority, is inextricably entwined with French history, the status of French Jews has been both the model and the touchstone for the relationship between other minorities and the Nation.¹ Not only does the 1791 *Décret d'émancipation des Juifs* therefore mark a major turning point in the history of the Jews of France, but it is also the document that does the most to reveal the Jacobin stance on nationhood and citizenship that, although hotly debated, continues to prevail today in France.

In the last two or three decades, France has seen an intense renewal of self-questioning by its Jews. Although most of it has been associated with the memory and commemoration of the deportation of Jews to Nazi death camps under the German Occupation and the Vichy regime, I think that it would be a mistake to limit our analysis of this crisis to the aftermath of the Occupation, however tempting this simplification may prove. In this essay, I shall sketch an alternative understanding of French Jewry's current identity crisis. Or rather, since I am neither a historian nor a sociologist, I shall defer instead to *La Place de l'étoile* by Patrick Modiano, one of the best recent French novels, which, as its author emphatically claims, treats "the Jewish problem and nothing else" ("Entretien" 42). With the economy afforded to it by poetic license, *La Place de l'étoile* offers one of the most pointed and probing examinations of the problems facing French Jews today.²

La Place de l'étoile as Site of Memory

By all accounts, Patrick Modiano's *La Place de l'étoile*, published in 1968, is a strange book. Although it is a first-person narrative, there is hardly a "narrative" to speak of; the plot is inconsistent and truncated; the action tosses the protagonist rather randomly all over Europe and Israel; and the narrator himself is too

mercurial to characterize. Similar liberties are taken with the novel's time-frame: the narrator is, oddly, always in his twenties, appearing alternately as a contributor to *Je suis partout*, a patient of Freud well after World War II, Eva Braun's lover, and a French Jew in search of his roots in Israel.³ To further confound the reader, he is sometimes athletic, tall, dark, and handsome, sometimes dying of tuberculosis, and sometimes (six times, to be precise) actually killed—which is odd for anyone, but even more so for a narrator who, by definition, must be alive to tell his story.

And yet, paradoxically, despite *La Place de l'étoile*'s disregard for any semblance of verisimilitude (historical, psychological, or other), history—or more precisely French Jewish history—is the novel's major concern. Take the title of the novel, for example. It refers to a site in Paris, in the center of which stands *l'Arc de Triomphe*, which commemorates Napoleon's victory at Austerlitz. It is also known as a marvel of urban planning that owes its name to the circular confluence of large avenues that form a star, the center of which affords a privileged vantage point over the city—just as Modiano's novel affords us a privileged vantage point over the city and, by extension, over France. But the phrase *la place de l'étoile* also means, literally, the place of the star, and in the Jewish context of the novel, of the yellow star Jews were obliged to wear under the German occupation. This linguistic conflation of the French and Jewish histories is further illustrated even before we actually open the book by an anecdote strategically placed, first, on the jacket of the novel, and then again, as an epigraph:

In June of 1942, a German officer approaches a young man and says: "Excuse me sir, where is the Place de l'Étoile?"

The young man points to the left side of his chest.

La Place de l'étoile deals then with French-Jewish identity in the wake of World War II. Yet, as the above anecdote points out, that Jewish identity is intricately bound up with France's own sense of identity—*l'Arc de Triomphe* is, after all, the French commemorative monument that does the most to evoke images of France's historical grandeur. In modern France, national identity is firmly grounded in history and its commemoration—mostly as a result of the Third Republic's deliberate effort to "republicanize" the masses through an elaborate system of public education in which the teaching of history (both political and cultural) figured pre-eminently.

Hence, for the last century, French patriotism and identity have been inseparable from identification with history. The historian Charles Langlois notes with amusement that in response to the 1897 baccalaureate question "What is the use of the teaching of history?", eighty percent of the students stated "to exalt patriotism" (Langlois 288-89). Around the same time, Ernest Lavisse, the official historian of the Third Republic, whose books were used in the French school system for half a century, staunchly declared:

I know that if I denied myself certain feelings and certain ideas, my love for my birthplace, a long memory of my ancestors, the joy of discovering my own soul in their thoughts and actions, in their history and in their legends; if I did not feel that I am part of a whole whose origin is lost in a distant fog and whose future is unknown; if I did not quiver at the sound of a national anthem; if I did not adore the flag the way a pagan adores an idol who demands incense and on certain days, hecatombs; if I forgot our national suffering, truly, I would no longer know who I am or what I am doing in this world. My life would not be worth living. (Lavisse 322)⁴

This confession is revealing in that not only does it ground nationalism in a veneration of the collective past, but it also does the same with respect to personal identity. In so doing, it collapses the difference between national and personal identity. *La Place de l'étoile* dutifully follows Lavisse's prescription. Schlemilovitch's quest for identity takes the form of a search for a national past which, in Lavisse's words, he could adore as one does in a religious cult and in which he would discover his own soul. This past would therefore be at once personal and national. Significantly, exemplary historical characters abound in *La Place de l'étoile*, especially those most often depicted in school readers and history textbooks, such as *Le Petit Lavisse* and *Le Tour de France par deux enfants*, or in well-known patriotic paintings such as those of Gros and Delacroix. The novel is brimming with those exemplary heroes who, known to all, have come to constitute a shared heritage vital to French national identity: Clovis, Saint Louis, Jeanne d'Arc, Philippe Auguste, Condé, Napoléon. . . .

And yet, there is a twist to this history, since, while he is a run-of-the-mill Frenchman, Schlemilovitch is also of Jewish ancestry. Abiding by Lavisse's teaching, he wishes to hold on to the memory of his ancestors, to the joy of discovering his own soul in

their thoughts, actions, history, and legends. What ancestors, however? Where will he find those memories if French history makes no mention of Jews? Should he cross out of his memory some, but not all, of his ancestors (and their histories)? But then, did he not learn from the French tradition that his “ancestors” provide the grounding for his national allegiance? Only a revision of the exemplary narrative can resolve this quandary; a good logician, Schlemilovitch adds his Jewish view point to the depiction of events normally found in French history books.

A brief example will clarify this last remark. In one of his experimentations with various models of national allegiance, Schlemilovitch tries to be a “true” Frenchman by conforming to the regionalist ideal of living a rustic life in the country.⁵ In a remote village he becomes a school teacher and fervently teaches none other than the most glorious military chapters of French history: Jeanne d’Arc’s triumphs, Philip II’s victory over King John of England (*Jean sans terre*, John Lackland, whose nickname is an ironic nod to the traditional Jewish predicament), Condé’s victory at Rocroi, Napoleon’s at Arcole. . . . His enthusiasm is, however, short lived:

I soon realized that I lacked the *furia francese*. The blond knights left me behind and the banners bearing the *fleur-de-lis* fell out of my hands. The lament of a Yiddish singer spoke to me of a death that did not wear spurs, casoars, or white gloves.

Finally, at my wits end, I pointed at Gran-Gevrier, my best student: “It was a Jew that broke the Soissons vase! A Jew, do you hear me? Copy the following a hundred times: ‘The Soissons vase was broken by a Jew.’ Do your homework, Gran-Gevrier! You have an F, Gran-Gevrier. I am putting you on detention.’ ” (118)

What is the Soissons vase? No less than one of the founding moments of French nationalism, as Clovis, the fifth-century chief of a Frankish tribe who converted to Catholicism—and is therefore believed by some to be the founder of France—insisted on returning to the Archbishop Rémi (who was later canonized) a vase that was part of the loot taken during the decisive battle of Soissons.⁶ In contradiction with the time-honored tribal tradition of equality among warriors, however, he did so even before the victors had had a chance to divide the spoils (“hors part”). One of Clovis’s soldiers, keen on defending his ancestral privileges, objected to the arbitrariness of the “hors part” and, out of pique, hit and broke the vase. A year

later, Clovis found an opportunity to lower his axe on that very soldier's head, a scene during which he uttered one of those phrases known to every French school boy and girl: "Just as you did to the vase in Soissons."⁷ A laudable Christian deed indeed.

And yet, notwithstanding Schlemilovitch's ire, nothing in the only account we have of the Soissons vase episode allows us to surmise that the soldier might have been Jewish. Quite the contrary, he was most likely a true Frank and a champion of tribal traditions. Why then would Modiano/Schlemilovitch tamper with such a well-known historical narrative? Precisely because it testifies to the very nature of the construction of identity in France. In inscribing a Jewish presence in the history of that crucial founding moment, Schlemilovitch simply follows Lavissee's blueprint: the path to identity must take him through the discovery of his own soul in his ancestors' legends. With a minor "correction," he can now partake in the narrative shared by all French men and women without having to elide the Jewish part of his identity (furthermore, inserting a Jewish presence at the birth of the Nation may even counter the Right's repeated claim that Jews are latecomers, and therefore not part of the "true France").

Any revision of collective memory must, however, comply with the patterns that shaped that memory in the first place. Given France's past persecution of Jews, the repeated charges of disloyalty to which they were subjected, given France's promulgation of its own harsh "Jewish Laws" in 1940 and its willing collaboration with the Nazis in the deportation of Jews—given all these constraints, one cannot construct just *any* memory. Narrative consistency and continuity, logical identity, and psychological coherence impose formidable limitations on a Jew's ability to formulate historical narratives in which he will play a credible part. Even as he tries to find "antecedents in French history,"⁸ what role, except that of the "outsider" or the "villain," can a Jew play in a founding scenario in which State and Church (that is, the Catholic Church) are fused? Schlemilovitch's three-step reasoning is therefore impeccable. First, if national identity draws on a shared past, then Jewish French nationals should share this past. Second, if this past makes no mention of the part Jews may have played in it, such an omission needs to be addressed and corrected. Last, to be credible, a "corrected" past has to comply with verisimilitude (for lack of a verifiable truth), must conform to established and recognizable historical patterns, of

which the most prevailing for a Jew is the tradition of alienation, marginalization, demonization, and persecution. Hence, if Schlemilovitch must identify a Jew in this founding episode, the only candidate for the part is the greedy soldier who opposed the magnanimous gesture of the noble king, and the righteous union of Church and State. The narrative that passes as true is not the one that tells what “really happened” but, as Aristotle emphasized, the one that enacts general principles and follows conventions that conform to what is known to be possible.

What then is the difference between a Jew like Schlemilovitch and, for the sake of the argument, another like Marc Bloch, co-founder of the illustrious *Annales* school of historiography, who was executed as a member of the French Resistance in 1944 by the German occupiers? In 1940, Bloch wrote:

I am Jewish, not by religion since I practice neither the Jewish religion nor any other, but by birth. . . . The only time I claim my origins is when I face an anti-Semite. Those who will oppose my testimony may try to ruin it by declaring me a *métèque* I shall answer them that my great-grandfather was a soldier in 1793; that my father served in Strasbourg during the 1870 siege and that he and my two uncles left their native Alsace after its annexation to the Second Reich; that I was taught to worship those patriotic traditions which Alsatian Jews have always fervently upheld; and, finally, that France, from which some would like to expel me today—perhaps (who knows?) will even succeed—will remain, whatever happens, the fatherland I cannot uproot from my heart. I was born in France, I drank from the wells of her culture, I made her past my own, I breathe freely only under her skies, and, in turn, I have done my best to defend her.⁹ (*L'étrange défaite* 31-33)

Bloch was an accomplished product of the republican tradition: secular and fervently patriotic. His only religion was republicanism, its Jacobin values and traditions: first, he invoked his right of birth (“I was born in France”), second, he derived his personal identity from his relationship to France’s past (“I drank from the wells of her culture, I made her past my own”), and finally, he proclaimed his unconditional loyalty to the Nation (“I breathe freely only under her skies”). In other words, he came as close to Lavisser’s ideal as one can come without sheepishly denying his Jewish origins—but then, did all he could to minimize their political or civic importance. This discursive strategy illustrates to the letter the Jacobin ideal. He is indeed of

Jewish origin, implies Bloch, but this fact is irrelevant both to his civic status (French citizen), and to his love for and loyalty to France.

What then is the difference between pre- and post-Occupation Jews, between Bloch and Schlemilovitch? A shattered dream. Bloch died as a Frenchman. His execution as a French patriot at the hands of German soldiers validated his beliefs. Unlike so many other French Jews, he was neither deported by the French police nor killed by Vichy militia. In other words, he died before realizing the extent to which France had betrayed the Jacobin ideal with which he so totally identified. After the war, however, as France loudly reaffirmed its universalist tradition, the surviving French Jews were called upon to return to the same ideals that had failed them, to reintegrate into the very same society that had just betrayed them, to trust the very hand that had just stripped them of their civil rights or sent them to the "East." The battered memory of a whole generation of Jews stood, then, in sharp contradiction to the beliefs around which the healing nation was rallying. Not to be excluded a second time from the project of national unification, they opted for silence—a silence, however, laden with untold memories.¹⁰

French Historiography and Jewish Identity

Marc Bloch wrote that "failure to understand the present is inevitably due to ignorance of the past" (*L'étrange défaite* 12). Perhaps not just any past. If it is to account simultaneously for one's personal and one's collective identity, history must be monological. In other words, if adherence to the past is to cement the nation, this past must be the same for all. When this historical master narrative conflicts with the memory of any group within the nation, however, both the historical narrative and the constitution of the individual suffer. French-Jewish history, for example, includes a few chapters that necessarily "escaped" Lavissee's attention—the very same chapters whose logic imposed on Schlemilovitch his curious identification with Clovis's rebellious warrior. Those chapters would have taught that until the French Revolution, Jews were not equal before the law: their safety and well-being depended directly on the deals they managed to cut with the authorities—either with local noblemen or with the crown itself. Some Jewish communities then lived relatively well (in Bordeaux, notably), others did not (in Alsace)—but even that distinction was very unstable. For the sake of simplification, we may generalize and say that, until the Revolution, the

Jews of France (note that they were not “French”) suffered repeated massacres, forced conversions, confiscations of wealth, and frequent exiles that culminated in their final expulsion in 1394 by royal decree (a decree that, incidentally, has never officially been revoked). They were subjected to especially heavy taxation, to laws that forbade them to own land and, often, even to reside within the town limits; they were also excluded from the guilds on which the power of the rising bourgeoisie and the early industrialization of France rested.

Many centuries of misery, then, ended in 1791 when it was decreed that French Jews fell under the new Constitution, just like other Frenchmen. This was a first in the history of European Jewry. French Jews were euphoric:

Behold, this people that used to be persecuted and rejected, and that now proudly raises its head; . . . behold as astonished fathers tell their children of a world order that is new and nevertheless so natural. Behold as they tell their children how these generous Frenchmen have given us the first example of justice the world has ever rendered to our unfortunate nation. Yes, children, this is your fatherland, your Jerusalem, this is the land God promised your ancestors. Hail, oh welcoming land, thou who hast adopted us. Let us raise our hands to the heavens—join us in prayer, dear children. The Father of all men welcomes your prayers. Bring the blessing of our heavenly Father on this country, which is in its essence good, generous, open, and noble. May Jews and Frenchmen be one brotherly nation forever.

Le commissaire du comité Saint-Roch,
citoyen français de confession juive
(qtd. in Philippe 117)

We should understand, however, the nature of the French emancipation of Jews. The Decree freed Jews to be French, not to be “Jewish.” Even as we note that the Constitution and the Declaration of the Rights of Man can be seen as the culmination of the French Enlightenment, we should remember that the very same Enlightenment was not all that favorable to Jews as such. Its ideals were deeply secular. The *philosophes* denounced religion as superstition and saw it as a tool in the hands of the monarchy. Religion was the main obstacle on the road to the republican and humanist education envisioned by the reformers. The target of the *philosophes*’ criticism was, of course, Catholicism, the ruling religion. But they

also denounced Judaism in which they located, first, the roots and inspiration of Catholicism, and second, a collection of outdated and nefarious segregative practices. The Jewish religion was therefore generally reviled by the *philosophes* (with the notable exception of Diderot)—a political stand that should not be confused either with old-fashioned Church-inspired anti-Judaism or with later forms of racial anti-Semitism.

The Emancipation Decree did not clear the Jews of the *philosophes'* charges. In the end, Judaism retained its negative value. The Revolution only introduced a new distinction between "Judaism" and "Jews": while Judaism remained a disparaged religion, Jews themselves, as individuals, became *citoyens*—provided, of course, they abandoned their segregative practices (hence the substitution of the term "*israélites*" for "*juifs*," which had come to denote those practices). With the Emancipation Decree, it was understood that Jews would become "normal," that is, that they would strip away their differences and be like any other Frenchman—in short, that they would assimilate.¹¹ In this respect, Clermont-Tonnerre's much quoted declaration at the General Assembly in 1789 set the tone:

Inasmuch as they are individuals, we must grant everything to Jews, but inasmuch as they are a nation, nothing. They can be neither a political body nor a special order. Individually, they must be citizens. (qtd. in Philippe 112)

Take another example. In 1786, the Royal Academy of Metz announced a writing competition on the subject, "Is it possible to make Jews happier and more useful in France?" L'Abbé Grégoire won the competition in 1788 with an essay entitled "Essay on the Jews' Physical, Moral, and Political Regeneration." "Regeneration?" The contest only asked for "happier and more useful." Regeneration, on the other hand, implies that Jews suffer from a fatal flaw, from a physical, moral, or political disease. This word does little to exonerate them from the charges leveled against them (especially in Metz, which was more anti-Jewish than, say, Paris). And yet the winning essay was a landmark step toward the 1791 Emancipation Decree and Grégoire himself was a staunch defender of the civil rights of French Jews. A lesser known fact is that in 1786, the same Grégoire had written another report to the General Assembly recommending the ban of dialects and *patois*, which consequently led the

Assembly to decree in 1794 that French would be the only official language of the nation (note that Grégoire was also a strong advocate of the abolition of slavery).¹² The pattern that emerges is that in its most progressive and humanitarian form, the Republic's elaboration of nationalism (or even the principles of "*liberté, égalité, fraternité*") relied on the notion of *civil conformity*. While we in the United States, see multiculturalism as a progressive expression of political and cultural tolerance, the winning Jacobin ideology of the French Revolution and, more precisely, the decree emancipating the Jews, expressed the very same progressive political and cultural tolerance by effacing differences, by ensuring conformity—a concept that the Third Republic zealously promoted and eventually imposed. In short, diversity was definitely out, reactionary, un-French.

And yet, to be Jewish was to be different. In the eighteenth century, Jews defined themselves primarily by their religion, that is, precisely by the very same religious practices that were so denigrated by the Enlightenment. To compound this difficulty, Jewish religion and identity had always rested on a strong sense of Jewish history and memory.¹³ To abandon religious practices or Jewish memory was tantamount to giving up Judaism altogether (only about a century later would a new form of Judaism emerge in Germany, with the Reform movement led by Moses Mendelssohn). While granting Jews civil rights, the Decree thus voided the mainstay of Jewish life: a strong sense of community based on a shared memory. As such, not only did the Decree impose conflicts of memories and histories on French Jews, but at the same time, it inaugurated a national ethos by which these same conflicts were deemed unpatriotic.

And yet, for the most part, French Jews welcomed the Decree. They set out to "earn" their new equality by becoming truly French and gradually abandoned most of the religious practices that set them apart. In short, they "assimilated." France, not Canaan, became the Promised Land. Whereas the Jewish tradition requires that each Jew thinks of himself as having been personally freed from ancient Egyptian bondage, French Jews remembered and commemorated another freedom: the one they received from the Republic to which they had become fiercely loyal. In other words, they inscribed French history over Jewish history, as if on a palimpsest, and all but "forgot" the original text. At the time, it seemed a fair price to pay for the privilege of "belonging."¹⁴

The Virtue of Forgetting

In forgetting their alienating past so as to secure the unified, noncontroversial historical narrative needed to cement national unity, French Jews were undoubtedly espousing the political thought of the times. In his *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?* (1882), still the major reference for France's modern reflection on nationalism, Ernest Renan had indeed proclaimed that to be a nation, France must forget, for example, the Saint Barthelemy massacre, and the massacres of the thirteenth century.¹⁵ Furthermore, not only were Jews abiding by the universalist ideals espoused by the Jacobins but, more generally, they were in line with more than a century of European intellectual history. Whether we read Darwin (*On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* [1859]), Nietzsche (*On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life* [1874]), Bergson (*Matter and Memory* [1906]), Freud (his whole *oeuvre*), or Halbwachs (*Collective Memory* [1925])—to mention the most influential—the most progressive figures of the times offer the same “solution” to the conflict of differences: whatever might pose a threat for the present or future well-being of either the individual, the community, the Nation, or the species must be dismissed, destroyed, repressed, suppressed, annulled, forgotten.¹⁶

After the civil wars of the thirteenth and the sixteenth centuries came the civil war of 1940-44. France set out to forget one more chapter of its history for the sake of national unity. French Jews went along and, in their eagerness to reintegrate into the nation, played down the ease with which Vichy had annulled the law that guaranteed their right to integration (thus playing down the fragility of that law) and reclaimed their Jacobin heritage (at least until the seventies).¹⁷ Indeed, the glorious standing de Gaulle claimed for France among the Allies stood in stark contrast to her spectacular military defeat, to the armistice she hastily signed with the victor, and especially, to her willing and often eager collaboration with Germany—including, of course, the promulgation of Jewish laws, the internment of Jews (mostly foreigners, but recently naturalized French Jews were stripped of their citizenship to facilitate internment and expulsion, while longtime French Jews were often called upon to fill German quotas of convoys to the “East”), and finally, their deportation. De Gaulle then saved France a second time: without as much as batting an eyelash, he rewrote history. He “forgot” that the General

Assembly had legally voted to give full power [*pleins pouvoirs*] to Pétain and that the hero of Verdun had been enthusiastically embraced by an overwhelming majority of Frenchmen in 1940, despite his defeatism and his decidedly pro-Nazi politics. He “forgot” that although some Frenchmen fought with the Allies, others enrolled in the S.S. and fought with the Nazis on the eastern front, and that the Vichy government lead by Pétain had indeed hoped and actively negotiated for a more extensive military collaboration with Nazi Germany. He “forgot” that a civil war was still raging in France. In his best prophetic oratory style, he rewrote history as soon as he entered Paris proclaiming, much to the delight of the largely collaborationist capital that had turned patriotic at the eleventh hour:

Paris outragé! Paris brisé! Paris martyrisé! mais Paris libéré! libéré par lui-même, libéré par son peuple avec le concours des armées de la France, avec le concours de la France entière, de la France qui se bat, de la seule France, de la vraie France, de la France éternelle.

Paris, which has been violated! Paris, which has been shattered! but Paris which has been liberated! Liberated by itself, by its people, with the help of the armies of France, with the help of the whole of France, of a France which fights, of the only France, of true France, of eternal France. (qtd. in Rousso, *Le Syndrome* 30)

Gaullism propagated a myth according to which true patriotism had never given in to the pressures of a handful of collaborators. On the international scene, this myth earned France its “rightful” place among the victorious allies. On the national scene it paved the way for national reconciliation and consolidation and let a few convicted collaborators bear the brunt for treason—to the relief of the majority of Frenchmen whose past was, to say the least, tainted.¹⁸ And lo and behold, history went obligingly along, Frenchmen went along, and Paris “forgot” its collaboration with the victorious enemy, forgot the morning papers of the last four years and the partying with the Germans; forgot its pro-Nazi movies, theaters, books, radio, *chansoniers*, exhibits, and cabarets, and forgot its anti-Semitism (and this time, I am hardly simplifying). With the onset of the Cold War, France also forgot the crucial role the communists had played in the much-touted *Résistance* and expelled them from the government. Anything that might have harmed the glorious future of France in

the new world order was dismissed, repressed, annulled, suppressed, forgotten. As de Gaulle exuberantly proclaimed “Les jours des pleurs sont passés. Les jours de gloire sont revenus” ‘the days of mourning are over, the days of glory have returned,’ echoing the lyrics of “La Marseillaise,” “les jours de gloire sont arrivés” ‘the days of glory have arrived’ (qtd. in Duras 44). The timing of this proclamation was particularly ironic since it was pronounced on April 3, 1945, that is, just as the first concentration and death camp survivors were returning to Paris with their horror stories. All de Gaulle had to offer them was, in so many words, “it’s over, let’s forget the past and go back to business as usual”—“les jours de gloire sont revenus.” Only a generation later, in the seventies, would France begin to face its suppressed past—awakened from its slumber by American Robert Paxton’s *Vichy France: Old Guard, New Order* (1972, translated into French in 1973) and Marcel Ophuls’ documentary *Le Chagrin et la pitié* (*The Sorrow and the Pity* [1971]). Modiano’s early books, published at the same time, were yet another reminder that de Gaulle’s days of glory were but a delusion. The party was over.

Tel Aviv-Paris

And what of Tel Aviv, announced by my title? In one of his last journeys, Schlemilovitch goes to Israel. Now, in 1967, the world still saw in Israel more a redeeming myth than a reality. It was a construction meant to counter the negative stereotypes propagated by pre-war anti-Semitism. To the charges of cosmopolitanism and lack of national loyalty, “Israel” (I use the quotation marks to refer to the country *qua* construction until the seventies) opposed a pioneering spirit, brave men and women selflessly committing themselves to a national project and enthusiastically rebuilding their newly reclaimed fatherland—one hand on the steering wheel of a tractor and the other on an Uzi. Whereas in the past, Jews had been accused of being parasites whose shady financial practices exploited the country without contributing to the national economy, “they” now farmed the land and strove for economic self-sufficiency. Whereas the same Jews had been accused of cowardliness, or, worse, of going like cattle to slaughter, “they” now fought proudly and heroically to survive against all odds. Whereas Jews were accused of being sneaky, evasive, and skulking, “they” are now seen as loud, obtrusive, and blunt. In short, “Israel” remained defined by the very same anti-Semitic stereotypes it was said to have dispelled—only a

contrario, negatively (even the much praised slogan “Never Again” testifies to this difficult relationship to the past). For the sake of life (Nietzsche), survival (Darwin), action (Bergson), psychological well-being (Freud), “Israel” had turned the page on the Jewish Diaspora and broken its ties with its recent past. In short, “it” had opted for forgetting, not the Saint Barthelemy massacre, not the Collaboration, but the embarrassing death camps. (Let’s be clear, however: I am not describing the young state of Israel whose attitude toward the Jewish past was far more complex than its public image conveyed; I am describing how it was perceived.).

If this “Israel” found such strong popular support in France until the late sixties, it was in very large part because “it” corresponded to France’s need to consolidate its own future—at the price of forgetting its past (all the more so, since in erasing these years, “Israel” whited out the Genocide and, consequently, the part played by France in its implementation). “Israel” was the mirror image of France’s Gaullist national project and, ironically, of the assimilationist tendencies of the majority of its Jews.

All this does not sit too well with Schlemilovitch, who, after the Collaboration, lost faith in the Jacobin myth. “Forgetting” had done little for those Jews who, lured by the Jacobin ideals, had elected France as their country of adoption. Schlemilovitch can no longer forget that he once forgot. He cannot forget the betrayal. And yet, like Bloch, he is French. He remembers both French and Jewish history, culture, literature. He drank from the wells of both cultures; he too has made France’s past his own, but he cannot forget that just as France was divided in two zones for four years, her inhabitants were divided into two categories—with one rounding up the other. Today, he lives in both worlds, he claims both, he loves both: but he is torn by their contradictions.

Upon his arrival in Tel Aviv, Schlemilovitch is greeted by the Admiral Levy, who raves, on the one hand, about France’s “Liberal traditions, the sweetness of the Anjou region, of the Touraine” and on the other, about Israel, citing its “prodigious dynamism from Haifa to Eilat, from Tel-Aviv to the Dead Sea” (175). Yet, neither Jewish “dynamism” nor France’s “sweetness” [*douceur*] figure in Schlemilovitch’s tortured memory. They simply do not correspond to the recent experience of French Jews. When Admiral Levy extols the beauty of “La Marseillaise” (a bloody war march), Schlemilovitch retorts with a phrase that sums up his quandary: “I am not quite

French, Admiral, I am a French JEW, a French JEW. . . .” He is immediately sent to jail (189).

What are the charges against him? Precisely his European Jewish history, or rather, the way European Jewish history interferes with the “Israeli” project of nation-building. When Schlemilovitch admits piteously that he has gone to Israel because he “did not want to die without having seen the land of [his] ancestors,” the commissaire Cohen snipes:

And then, you intended to GO BACK to Europe, didn’t you? To start your grimaces, your antics [*guignol*] all over again? Don’t bother to answer, I know the tune: Jewish distress, Jewish lament, Jewish anxiety, Jewish despair . . . wallowing in their grief, asking for more, longing for the sweetness of the ghettos and the ecstasy of the pogroms! One of two things Schlemilovitch: either you listen to me and you follow my instructions: then, it’s fine! Or you insist on playing the rebel, the Wandering Jew, the persecuted, and in that case, I hand you over to Commandant Elias Bloch! (189)

Why this ultimatum? Skillfully pushing to its farthest limit the reductive Manichaeian logic that runs through the novel (forgetting vs. remembering), Modiano goes “Israel” one better by turning an already simplified and distorted representation into its own caricature. Instead of simply denying the past, his Israel aggressively bans it:

You are now in a country that is young, vigorous, dynamic. From Tel Aviv to the Dead Sea, from Haifa to Eilat, no one gives a hoot any more about Jewish anxiety, fever, tears, JINX. No one! We do not want to hear again about Jewish wit, Jewish wisdom, Jewish skepticism, Jewish contortions, Jewish humiliation and distress. . . . We are energetic guys, pioneers with square jaws, and not Yiddish singers, à la Proust, à la Kafka, à la Chaplin! (189-90)

In other words, the only “solution” to the contradictions that inhabit the Israeli national project is the radical elimination of any person, book, idea, discourse, etc., that risks interfering with the representations with which the nation identifies. It is no wonder then that Modiano’s Tel Aviv looks strangely like Paris. One finds there an avenue des Champs-Élysées, an avenue Kleber, a Fifteenth Arrondissement, a Place de l’Opéra, and, of course, a Place de l’Étoile

crowded with G.I.'s flashing their cameras. One moves around town in a "panier à salade" (police car), "like those the French police used for the big roundup of July 16-17, 1942"(177). One hangs out at the Fouquet's, the Hôtel Majestic, the Grand-Duc, at 31 bis and 72 avenue Foch, 57 boulevard Lannes, 48 rue de Villejust, 101 avenue Henri-Martin, 3 and 5 rue Mallet-Stevens, 21 and 23 square du Bois-de-Boulogne, 25 rue d'Astorg, 6 rue Adolphe-Yvon, 64 boulevard Suchet, 49 rue de la Faisanderie, 180 rue de la Pompe. To crown this inventory of the buildings requisitioned during the war by the French police or the German Gestapo, the main scene of this section takes place in the central Gestapo office, at 93 rue Lauriston. On the Israeli radio, one listens to Charles Trenet—preferably, to cover the cries of tortured prisoners. In Tel Aviv cafés, one dances to the voices of Zarah Lelander and Marlena Dietrich, who sing "Lili Marlène" and "Der Wind hat mir en Lied erzählt" (popular hits in occupied Paris). At the same time, decadent Jewish books burn in giant auto-da-fé and European Jews are led to torture clad in concentration camp garb. On Schlemilovitch's striped pajamas a yellow star reads "Französisch Jude." The weirdoes who hang out in town form an abject cosmopolitan group with French, Russian, German, and Japanese-sounding names, foreshadowing the one-dimensional collaborators who traipse through Modiano's second book, *La Ronde de Nuit*, published one year after *La Place de l'étoile*.

Schlemilovitch has jumped from the frying pan into the fire. His flight from one nation that solves the contradictions that haunt it by disposing of them has led him to a second nation that does the exact same thing, for the very same reasons. Tel Aviv, Paris, Nazi Germany are one and the same. Their underlying principle remains the same: when collective unity rests on the selective elimination of anything and anyone that challenges the story one may wish to believe about oneself and one's country, final solutions abound. French Jews crossed out their "Jewishness"; France crossed out her collaborationist past; "Israel" crossed out Jewish martyrdom; Nazi Germany crossed out her non-Aryans. The major difference between them hinges on the rigor with which this principle was implemented.

In Conclusion

I am reminded of the well-known definition of comparison in Aristotelian rhetoric in which understanding a figure of speech such as "Achilles leaped like a lion" requires that we displace our atten-

tion from the specificity of each object to the qualities they share: courage, strength, speed, and generosity. Comparison speaks neither of one term nor of the other. Instead, it isolates and brings forth the properties that two distinct objects share, abstracts them so to speak from the objects themselves and submits them—and them alone—to our scrutiny. Achilles is not a lion (it would be absurd to discuss the color of his mane). Nor is Tel Aviv Paris. Yet they share some essential features brought forth by their juxtaposition. All other properties they may have lose any pertinence to the discussion (and to the extent that comparison is thus a figure of “exclusion,” it makes Modiano’s rhetorical strategy even more fitting). More than it criticizes Frenchmen, Jews, or Israelis, *La Place de l’étoile* criticizes a property they have in common: the essentialist assumption according to which collective identity is one and indivisible. I do not know of a single instance in the modern world where this postulate has worked. And yet it is alive and well, and unfortunately, still inspires various forms of extreme intolerance. If *La Place de l’étoile* is not only a masterpiece, but also a courageous book, it is precisely because it exposes the limitations and the dangers of this postulate wherever it may be at work, even amidst the good intentions that pave the road to Hell.

Notes

1. A note should be made here of the French Protestants, who suffered three centuries of persecution. By the Revolution, however, they were largely integrated into the national community.
2. The Occupation was a time of extreme confusion in France. This essay cannot attempt to depict the wealth of nuances that span from one political party or group to another, most of which are still the subject of passionate debates. I have chosen to generalize whenever possible, in order to avoid cluttering my argument with erudite asides or overly specialized references.
3. *Je suis partout* was an extreme right newspaper published between 1930 and 1944. It was pro-Nazi and virulently anti-Semitic.
4. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.
5. See Herman Lebovics’s discussion of the racist overtones of the nationalist concept of “true France” elaborated by the Right.

6. The Franks were German tribes who came to France's territory from the north.

7. "C'est ainsi que tu as fait à Soissons avec le vase." Reported by Grégoire de Tours in *Histoire des Francs*. In 1996, France commemorated the 1500th anniversary of Clovis's conversion to Catholicism amidst violent conflicts over the political future of France. The extreme right, led by Le Pen, seized upon the occasion to call for an Aryan state free of immigrants (for the most part Muslim); the French church, led by Cardinal Lustiger advocated a few steps toward the return of a Catholic state, and the republican Left questioned the wisdom of a national commemoration of this particular episode. For a discussion of this incident, see Bergé.

8. "Si j'avais des antécédents à un point quelconque de l'histoire de France! Mais non, rien" 'If only I had antecedents at some point in France's history! But no, nothing.' Modiano uses this quote by Rimbaud as the epigraph of his second novel, *La Ronde de nuit* (1969).

9. Bloch had volunteered for service in the French Army. He was fifty-six years old and had six children. These lines are taken from the introduction to *L'étrange défaite*, his analysis of France's spectacular military defeat, written two months after the fact, and still one of the most lucid accounts of that period.

10. See A. Wieviorka's account of the reactions to Jewish memory right after the war (especially 159-328). See also Finkelkraut, as well as my own "Beyond Psychoanalysis."

11. See, for example, Pierre Larousse, who wrote: "The surrounding hatred isolated the Israelites and led them to constitute a nation even as they lived among other nations. . . . Jews are purebreds [*des purs sangs*], preserved from mongrelization [*abâtardissement*] by the blind hatred of those among whom they lived. Indeed, they have kept some of the faults that marked them on the shores of the Dead Sea and the Sea of Galilee; indeed, time has only exaggerated their greed; but can we blame them for it, after having deprived them of any affectionate commerce with us? Have we not ignored them until recently, except to hate and pillage them?" (qtd. by Pierre Emmanuel in Philippe 6)

12. As Ferdinand Bruno, the great Republican linguist, confirmed a few years later: "in a free nation, language must be one and the same for all" (qtd. in Nora VI: 45).

13. See, for example, Yerushalmi.

14. This is clearly a simplification—as the Dreyfus Affair, for example, shows. It remains, nonetheless, faithful to the general trends within the French-Jewish communities (with the notable exception of Alsatian Jews

who, incidentally, were not French between 1871 and 1918, when Alsace-Lorraine was annexed by Germany).

15. Renan also writes: "forgetting and even historical error play a crucial role in the formation of a nation; therefore, the progress of historical studies often constitutes a danger for nationality. Indeed, historical investigation exposes the violent origins of all political formations, even those whose effects have proved the most positive. Unity can be achieved by means of violence" (7-8).

16. I have developed this reading of the various theories of suppression in my *D'un passé l'autre*.

17. Again, I have to simplify. For a more nuanced perspective, see Wieviorka and also Rousso (*Le Syndrome*).

18. We should note here the logical double bind of the purge, since to incriminate a suspect, one must identify a crime—namely, collaboration: the very same collective "crime" that Gaullism had set out to efface. See Rousso, "Une Justice impossible," and "L'Épuration en France."

19. In fact, by rejecting any identification with Diaspora Jews targeted by these stereotypes, "Israel" played the hand of anti-Semitism and provided them much needed excuses. In this perspective, it is interesting to note the number of French nationalists who were raging anti-Semites and pro-Zionist, from Maurice Barrès to Charles Maurras, Georges Montandon, Pierre Drieu la Rochelle and Robert Brasillach. In the same vein, on the Nazi side, it is worth mentioning Adolph Eichmann, who invoked his pro-Zionist record at his postwar trial.

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