



GHOSTS

French Holocaust Children

Robert Hirsch

Introduction



DURING WORLD WAR II, OVER 11,000 JEWISH CHILDREN were deported from France to Auschwitz and other Nazi death camps in convoys that rolled until August 18, 1944, the day Paris was liberated. As the consequence of anti-Semitism, a disbelief in human equality of Jews, these children were among more than 75,000 French Jews deported under the Nazi extermination plan called the “Final Solution to the Jewish question.” Of those French Jews transported, only 2,564 survived the Holocaust. Most of the youths represented in *Ghosts* were arrested by the French gendarmes on orders of the authoritarian Vichy French State government that actively collaborated with the Nazis from 1940–1944. At most 300 of these Jewish children survived.

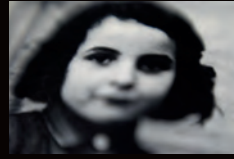
Ghosts: French Holocaust Children is a three-dimensional installation that acts as an ethereal commemoration to the children’s abbreviated lives. For them there was no becoming, only an end. The project is based on historic documents and photographs collected by author, lawyer, and Nazi-hunter Serge Klarsfeld and his wife Beate Klarsfeld, who were themselves targets of a neo-Nazi car bombing. I have reinterpreted these doc-

uments through two- and three-dimensional photographic representations to convey a haunting sense of lost human possibilities. This 600-plus expressionist portrait anthology is a composite of an archive database, historical reference, and media narrative. Its post-documentary approach blends outer and inner realities, constructing stories that examine the extreme boundaries of human behavior regarding identity, loss, memory, racism, and wickedness.

Ghosts challenges the ominous side of human nature that allows people to carry out evil deeds. Artists make things by taking life as their raw material and transfigure it into fresh forms that encourage comparisons. This is important because awakening one’s imagination directly opposes the Nazi program of dehumanization by generating empathy. In turn, this allows us to recognize the sameness of the human condition and its endless interconnections, thus reminding ethical people to speak out when they witness unjust and inhumane behaviors. This is essential because the worst thing one can do when confronted with repression is to remain silent.

—Robert Hirsch



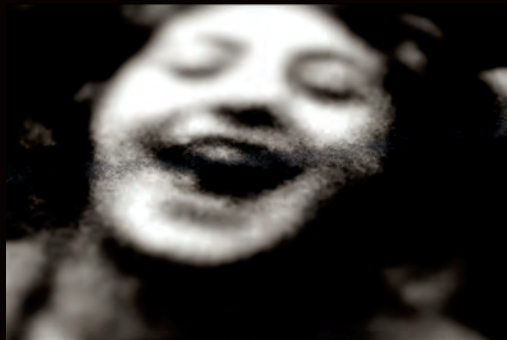












... and deported
Claude HIRSCH
... he was only 13
... (Haut-Rhin).









BEFORE GHOSTS

A Brief History of Anti-Semitism

Patricia E. Behre, Ph.D.

INTRODUCTION: THE PARADOX OF FRANCE

Much of the history of France and its Jews reflects a wider multi-layered European story. A politically dominant medieval Christian Church denounced the Jews and Judaism for its own gain, while minimally protecting them from the worst consequences of that denunciation— attempts at outright annihilation. Medieval Christian Europe preserved Jewish survival, allowing Jews their own houses of worship and semi-autonomous enclaves, but always as exploited second-class subjects, barred from land ownership or entrance into guilds, and without political standing. This same age in Europe also invented repellant ritual murder accusations and blood libels that regularly inflamed mobs of average Christians to lash out and physically attack those same small Jewish communities. Then the Church or local political leaders might step in to forbid or halt such attacks, but without deracinating the fear and hatred behind them. Thus medieval Europe invented an image of the demonic Jew, forever an enemy of Christians. And when Christian unity was needed, this Orwellian image of the eternally “other” Jews was ever at the ready. France, a steadfastly Catholic country, even despite the vicissitudes of the Reformation era, was an exemplar of this formula throughout its early history.

But at the same time France was, and is, the land of the Enlightenment, an intellectual movement which finally loosened the stranglehold of the Church on government and social attitudes. As such, France broke from Europe and its own past to lead the way toward a modern era of greater religious toleration. Here were the eighteenth-century revolutionaries who dared to imagine Jews as full citizens. Who saw in anti-Semitic restrictions the vestiges of human cruelty, not the judgment of their watchmaker god. By the nineteenth century, here



was the refuge for European Jews from other less hospitable countries. The place to go to, not to flee from.

How then do we assess the position of France, and the French, as we look particularly toward the reality of the Shoah? How can we understand the land which first emancipated the Jews, but then also participated so readily in their destruction? How to reconcile the homeland of the righteous journalist Emile Zola, with that of collaborationist Vichy? How to evaluate the French Protestant refuge Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, where Jewish children were sheltered, against the Paris that deported 11,000 children to their premature deaths? There is, in short, a distinctive French paradox when it comes to a national policy toward Jews and Judaism. Similar, perhaps, to the paradox of the assimilated German Jewish population who fell to Hitler's discriminatory laws and brutal roundups. But starker, especially when one pulls the lens out to consider a longer historical period. With regard to Jewish-Christian relations, France has embodied both the light of reason at its brightest, and the darkest core of a tenacious and malignant fear.

THE MEDIEVAL FOUNDATIONS OF FRENCH ANTI-SEMITISM

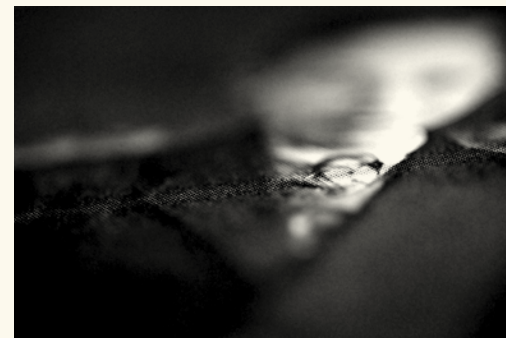


The land that became the kingdom of France was converted to Christianity in 496 C.E. with the decision of Clovis I to embrace that faith. Always a conglomeration of disparate regions, landlocked on three sides and therefore hard to unify and defend, France later developed the usual array of medieval anti-Jewish laws, haphazardly enforced by Christian political leaders. Limited to small scattered communities living under the special protection, and economic exploitation, of medieval kings, the Jews of France were periodically expelled, only to be later allowed back in as wards, without any automatic claim to residence. This made them particularly vulnerable. Though feudal France, like the rest of Europe, possessed no concept of “rights” per se, even the lowliest gentile peasant could harbor the expectation that the land he lived on was his to work, by customary law. Not so for Jews.

The Church itself—the only entity with influence throughout France, other than arguably the king—was not always opposed to Jewish interests. In 1146 the French Abbott Bernard of Clairvaux urged Christians to go on the Second Crusade, but cautioned against the violence against Europe's Jews that had occurred en route to the First. “The Jews are not to be persecuted, killed, or even put to flight,” he wrote. “The Jews are for us the living word of Scripture,

for they remind us always of what our Lord suffered. They are dispersed all over the world so that by expiating their crime they may be everywhere the living witnesses of our redemption.”¹ This quotation from Bernard succinctly introduces the tangled skein of official attitudes. The Church and its leaders wanted some Jews to survive within Christendom, and practice their Judaism, else prophecies of mass Jewish conversion at the end times could not come true. But holding fast to the idea that God intervenes in the daily world, and makes to succeed that which he finds worthy, religious authorities also wanted Jews to advertise the rightness of Christianity, and the wrongness of Judaism, by living in visible poverty and shame. Jews were particularly never to sit in positions of authority over Christian servants or neighbors. They could not be, or even appear to be, the equal of Christians. At the root of this discrimination, and of all subsequent vilification, was the ominous deicide charge—that Jews should be held responsible for the very death of Jesus. Preached by some church leaders, and immortalized in stained glass, most average Christians imbibed this fundamentally damning idea.

Changes to legal disabilities were slow, incremental, and uneven. Despite significant political and religious changes between 1500 and 1700, Jews remained few in number, and often vaguely and abstractly despised by their gentile neighbors. France’s Jews consisted of two communities during the early modern period: Sephardic “New Christians” who immigrated to the southern area of Bordeaux after Spain’s expulsion of thousands in 1492; and a smaller Ashkenazic community, centered around the northeastern city of Metz.² The survival of these quite different Jewish communities in France, as elsewhere in Europe, is a testament to Jewish resilience and adaptability. Over time they participated in French society, to a greater or lesser degree. Over time, they reminded French Christians of their contributions, and loyalty.



THE ENLIGHTENMENT AND ITS SHADOWS

By the dawn of what would become an explosive eighteenth century, about 40,000 Jews were living in France between these two regions. Sephardic southern Jews became increasingly confident to reveal themselves as Jews as the century progressed, and were typically more assimilated than their coreligionists in the North. In Metz the community was smaller, poorer, and more traditionally religious. All benefitted from the French movement of Enlightenment, which rested upon scientific discoveries and a new scientific approach to knowledge through observable evidence. The world worked not according to divine intervention, for emerging



scientific thinkers. It worked according to gravity and physical motion, tides and propulsion, all of which could be calculated, tested, measured, and understood by humans through their own agency. Embracing this, Galileo, and Newton, and all their intellectual offspring, opened the way for humans to similarly scrutinize, question, and change the institutions of their world, which increasingly revealed themselves as human products. Government was a human invention, and could thus be reinvented. Churches were man-made, and thus could be un-made, or de-fanged at the very least by decoupling them from the state. France was the birthplace of many of these new ideas which spread through the literary salons of Europe. When Paul Henri Thiry, the Baron d’Holbach, wrote in favor of free thought and against religious fanaticism he did so from his townhouse in central Paris, on the *rue Royale, Butte Saint-Roch*. And from Paris the literary productions of his dinner guests and colleagues—Rousseau, Diderot, and Voltaire among others—made their way to intellectual hubs in Vienna, St. Petersburg, and Monticello.

This new way of thinking opened up an entirely new world for the Jews. If God created the world, but then stepped back, then the tapestry of anti-Jewish laws, and marginalized place of the Jews, were all the product of a bygone, and now discredited, age. If men had “natural rights” then on what basis should Jews be held in legal degradation? Though these same ideas would eventually challenge the actual or virtual enslavement of black men, and of all women, the first and most obvious test in France became a reconsideration of the Jews. This is how the Jews won full citizenship for the first time in Europe: on the back of the utilitarian philosophy of French intellectuals. In 1791, amid the furor of the Revolution, the French National Assembly granted citizenship rights to Jews. Napoleon Bonaparte would later confirm and enforce these rights, though the pragmatic general had first to assure himself that Jews would be able to fight in his army on their Sabbath. With France’s European conquests, the principle of Jews as citizens spread.

There was, however, a dark residue of the medieval past, even within this Enlightenment thought—the notion that Jews as they were, were still inferior. But now it was assumed that their deficiencies could be cured through embracing the new secularism alongside former Christians turned Deists. Given their conditioning to see Judaism itself as suspect, these modern thinkers were destined to be frustrated, as gentiles had in the past. Where medieval theologians had sought Jewish converts to the truth of Christianity, or Protestant reformers had assumed their better, purer Christianity would obviously prove more persuasive, the

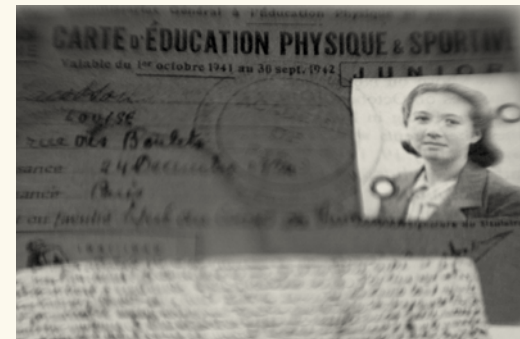
philosophes imagined a secular conversion. Raised up to the benefits of citizenship, Jews would blend in, fit in, and throw off their old-world customs, their antiquated dialects and languages, and their oriental ways. Distinctive Jewish modes of dress once mandated by the medieval Christian state, were now frowned upon in modern France. Once freed from a medieval Jewish badge, the thinking went, who would choose to wear a prayer shawl?

The potential for gentile backlash, post-Enlightenment, was obvious from the start. And within that backlash was something far more nefarious than anything the medieval world had known: the idea that if Jews resisted this secular conversion, it was not out of mere stubbornness. It must be because they *could not* achieve it. An earlier age concluded that Jewish difference grew from supernatural damnation. The new, more scientific age began to explore, darkly, if aspects of character were natural, or biologically determined. Thus age-old prejudices were fit to new justifications. This same pattern of course occurred in ideas upholding gender inequality. Rousseau, for example, advocated for a domestic-only education for women as determined not by Scripture but by their *natural* role as mothers and wives. For gentile notions about Jews, though, the pattern allowed for the growth of racial anti-Semitism.

ENTER ALFRED DREYFUS

This dark heart of French anti-Judaism, that had survived somehow even the earth-shattering transition to a more secular age, revealed itself inside the most popular and enduring French institution of the revolutionary and post-revolutionary period: the army. Stung by defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71, and convinced that the only explanation for that defeat must be the perfidy of traitors, French army officers in 1894 uncovered a case of actual internal espionage. Someone had leaked secrets to Germany. On scanty and inconclusive evidence they hastily determined that Captain Alfred Dreyfus, one of the few Jews to reach the army's General Staff, must be to blame. Edouard Drumont's *Libre Parole*, whose masthead included the motto "France for the French," had long since prepared the ground for the rush to judgment. An article in 1892 warned that the army was being infiltrated by Jews, and rhetorically speculated on the slow but insidious damage "the kikes" might do.³ "The semitic invasion," the same article asserted, "is like the breeding ground of microbes."⁴

A circumstantial case was assembled against Dreyfus and leaked to journals including Drumont's. Others, such as the Catholic *La Croix*, joined in, trumpeting Catholic purity and





DEPORTATION

Jewish malevolence. Long before modern electronic media, the unsubstantiated version of events dominated so thoroughly that large numbers of Parisians took to the street throughout the trial to demand vengeance against Dreyfus and “Death to the Jews.” The embers of anti-Judaism, thought long dead, reignited with a vengeance.

Dreyfus himself languished for more than four years on Devil’s Island, the French penal colony off the coast of South America. He was released only after a campaign waged by his devoted wife and brother was joined by a gentile army officer, Georges Picquart. Picquart scoured documents in the army’s Dreyfus file, and found the forgeries, lies, and cover ups that had put Dreyfus in chains. When he approached his superiors with his findings, Picquart himself was sent to a dangerous outpost in North Africa in hopes that he would be killed. Some officials argued internally that even if Dreyfus were innocent, keeping the army’s reputation intact was more important than the life of one Jewish man. Lucky for Dreyfus, Picquart left a letter outlining his investigation with a lawyer friend as a codicil to his will. This stalwart lawyer refused to wait for Picquart’s demise to reveal its details. Significantly, a pro-Dreyfus press had also emerged, and generated widespread publicity, including Emile Zola’s famous 1898 denunciation of the army’s frame-up: *J’Accuse*. Zola fled France to press Dreyfus’ case, which dragged on until 1906.

The Dreyfus Affair was the most notorious *cause celebre* of its day, followed by people around the world including in America. The anti-Dreyfus coverage brought forth grotesque cartoons, charges of evil, and full-throated racial stereotypes of Jews. Zola and Picquart’s defense of Dreyfus brought down the government of France whose leaders had proven so corrupt. The 1905 formal separation of church and state in France owes itself to the furor over Dreyfus’ false conviction. Ultimately, Dreyfus and Picquart were restored to places of honor. The whole episode has been immortalized in film treatments many times since. But the ugliness of the anti-Semitism revealed in Dreyfus’ Paris, at the dawn of the 20th Century, and the racial overtones that permeated the capital, provided a sobering corrective to the notion of a France, or a Europe, cured of its original sin toward Jews. The Affair also pointed toward the festering vitriol, and lack of sympathy toward Jews that would provide such potential for the execution of Hitler’s “Final Solution” and its French components. As the historian Michael Burns has noted, “Fascism may not have been born in the late nineteenth century, but many fascists were, and the epoch that stretched from [the 1880’s] to the Dreyfus affair provided a training ground for their strategies and a hothouse for their prejudices.”⁵



CONCLUSION: DEPORTATION AND BEYOND



The fall of France to Nazi Germany in 1940, and the efforts of the Vichy government to maintain a French state until France's liberation in 1944, have been examined and considered by a host of historians. But within the tortured period of resistance and collaboration, the story of France and its Jews is particularly sobering. Of the nation's 300,000 Jewish men, women, and children, only about 180,000 survived the war. Many thousands were deported to Auschwitz and other camps, some even before the Nazis required Vichy to do so. The presence of Jews has grown in France since that time. Today, as many as 500,000 Jews live in France, making it the second largest Diaspora community after the United States. The Pew Research Center reports that French adults have more favorable views of Jews than those in any other European country.⁶ Does this derive from the special history of France as a place of Jewish possibility? Or has the crucible of World War II left a stronger sense of responsibility to be tolerant? Conversely, observers must also note that today France knows regular anti-Semitic incidents, anxiety among its Jews, and real violence, most notably four Jewish hostages killed at a kosher supermarket two days after the attack on the offices of *Charlie Hebdo* (2015). The paradox continues. Some French Jews, if not many, can trace their families back to the earlier ages reviewed here—times of both emancipation and struggle. None, however, descend from the children depicted in *Ghosts*, whose lives remain in the realm of conjecture, and whose faces continue to bear witness. ❧

NOTES

1. Robert Chazan, ed., *Church, State and Jew in the Middle Ages* (West Orange, N.J.: Behrman House, 1980), 103.
2. For more on the southern French Jewish world, see Frances Malino, *The Sephardic Jews of Bordeaux: Assimilation and Emancipation in Revolutionary and Napoleonic France* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1978). For a treatment of Metz's Jews, see the author's *One King, One Law, Three Faiths, Religion and the Rise of Absolutism in Seventeenth-Century Metz* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2002).
3. Michael Burns, ed., *France and the Dreyfus Affair, A Documentary History* (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999), 10.
4. *Ibid.*, 11.
5. *Ibid.*, 3.
6. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/01/14/french-have-positive-views-of-both-jews-muslims/>

HIRSCH PROJECTS presents

GHOSTS

FRENCH HOLOCAUST CHILDREN

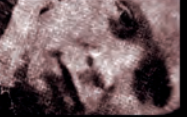












Paris DANCE at Concepts
EST. 1988

Marie BERGU was born in
Mande, just outside Paris. She and
her sister were deported on a convoy to
Nancy, where they lived at 66
rue de la République.
(Photo: G. P. P.)

group of c





Biographical Notes & Credits



Robert Hirsch is an artist, curator, and author of *Transformational Imagemaking: Handmade Photography Since 1960*; *Seizing the Light: A Social and Aesthetic History of Photography*; *Light and Lens: Photography in the Digital Age*; *Photographic Possibilities: The Expressive Use of Concepts, Equipment, Materials, and Processes*; and *Exploring Color Photography: From Film to Pixels*. Hirsch's work has been exhibited in over 200 solo and group shows. His other history based projects include: *Manifest Destiny & The American West*, *Unseen Terror: The Bomb, Other Bogeymen, and a Culture of Fear*, *Shining Brow: Frank Lloyd Wright*, *The Sky is Falling (Seeing Ghosts: 911)*, *The Sixties Cubed: A Counter Culture of Images*. His visual and written projects can be viewed at www.lightresearch.net

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"Before Ghosts: A Brief History of Antisemitism"

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Ghosts is the result of a 5-year collaboration among Robert Hirsch, Serge and Beate Klarsfeld, Bob Collignon, and Richard Schulenberg (model makers). With additional assistance from Anne Muntges, Bill DeVine, Henri-Pierre Mas, Robert Scalise, Kyle Butler, Tricia Butski, Patrick Foran, R. Patrick Robideau, Kevin Kline, and Mark Jacobs.

Ghosts is available to travel. For details contact: Hirsch@LightResearch.net

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