

## Memory and Identity in Post-Holocaust France

When I was growing up, both of my parents were travel agents. Hearing countless tales of their adventures instilled in me a young age a desire to experience the world outside my own. So, in high school, while my friends saved up for cars, I amassed my paychecks for my first voyage overseas. I justified this choice with the logic that cars would always be around, while the opportunity to go to central Europe with my history class would not. Three years have passed since that first trip, and I have since returned to Europe twice. Perhaps unsurprisingly, I still don't own a car, but my desire to travel has not waned; meanwhile, my bank account complacently awaits the day I make another withdrawal to fund my next overseas excursion.

In seventh grade I moved to Connecticut; while registering for classes at my new school, I faced the choice of French or Spanish as my language elective. As a southern California native, I found the prospect of French more thrilling and liberating, (even though I had studied Spanish for six years), so, on a fortuitous whim, the French language entered my life and has yet ceased to mesmerize me. Seven years later, I am a French and Chinese double major hoping to spend her entire junior year abroad: fall semester in Beijing, and spring semester in Paris.

In the spring of my senior year, I traveled to France with my AP French class. Shortly after arriving in Paris, my teacher led my class on a true Parisian's walking tour of the city. While we were anxious to chase Quasimodo in the bell towers of Notre Dame and reenact our favorite scenes from *Amélie* in Montmartre, my teacher brought us to the less visited Jewish Quarter. Pausing in front of an elementary school, my teacher solemnly called attention to a small plaque, which read, "165 Jewish children from this school deported to Germany during the Second World War were exterminated in Nazi camps. *Don't forget.*" In a detached voice, my

teacher admitted that she believed France had yet to confront this part of its past; curiosity about this truth has become an integral part of my fascination with French culture.

As a French Language major and a shameless Francophile, I feel it imperative to not only admire the emblematic *Tour Eiffel* when in France, but also to be cognizant of the more haunting aspects of France's culture, past, and even to some extent, its present. CISLA would provide me with an incomparable opportunity to employ my passion for French to delve deeper into understanding the culture of France through the lens of history—more specifically, France's contribution to one of the most horrendous moments in human existence: the Holocaust.

Claude Chabrol's documentary film, *The Eye of Vichy*, examines the anti-Semitic climate of Vichy France as a construction of Petain, the prime minister during World War II, and fellow collaborators. The bulk of the film is a compilation of anti-Semitic propaganda and film clips which appeared throughout both the occupied and unoccupied zones of France from 1940-1944. The film opens with the quote, "This film shows France not as it was from 1940 to 1944, but as Petain and the collaborators wanted it to be seen." In prefacing the film with this disclaimer, Claude Chabrol exemplifies the issue of selective memory and accountability in regards to France's role in the Holocaust. The production itself, released in 1993, is relatively recent, leading me to agree with my high school French teacher's sense that France has yet to reconcile its involvement in the Holocaust.

At the end of the war, France's circumstances were unique among European powers; somehow, France needed to reclaim its pre-war status, so as to benefit in treaty negotiations, in spite of the last four years of Vichy state collaboration. According to historian Henry Rousso, France's response to this predicament was to begin constructing an acceptable account of France's wartime mentality, in which all but a limited few were wholeheartedly opposed to their

German occupants. There was a strong desire by De Gaulle and intellectuals, such as Jean-Paul Sartre, to promote and uphold this idea that *all* French had been united in resistance to the Germans during the war. In this way, the political and intellectual leaders of post-war France took considerable liberties in constructing a selective and exceptional memory to substitute their actual history. Of course, there were many who actively participated in the French Resistance, however, not to the extent the De Gaulle claimed. The byproduct of reaction is a legacy of confusion between history and memory, which have operated synonymously in French WWII history.

Rousso asserts that France has now reached a point of adequate generational distance from the Holocaust so as to be able to more readily glean the facts from the myth, but the problem now is incorporating the true history into France's "national narrative." Rousso writes, "If the French have had difficulty 'coming to terms with the past,' it is because their relationship to this past weighs heavily on the present and future, on contemporary and projected notions of what it means to be French."

France's recent past is so fragmented—so muddled by a mishmash of historical fact, national myth, and constructed collective memory—that for much of the twentieth century, it remained in a state of avoidance of the truth. In 1995, Jacques Chirac became the first French head of state to acknowledge France's official collaboration with the Nazi's in the Holocaust, and the ensuing confusion about France's participation in the Holocaust. Maurice Papon, a notorious Vichy government official and French Nazi collaborator responsible for the deportation of hundreds of Jews to death camps, was finally tried and convicted for crimes against humanity in 1998. In many ways, French Holocaust history is under revision, and the search for truth supplants the denial, myth, and silence of the second half of the 20th century.

Yet, despite this progress, the diminishing hesitance and unease in discussing the Holocaust has coincided with an upsurge of anti-Semitic violence and discrimination in France. The period from 2001-2003 saw a dramatic increase in anti-Jewish attacks and manifestations in France, a backlash that many associate with the second Palestinian intifada, which began in 2000. While anti-Semitism in Europe is by no means confined to France, France has been at the center of anti-Semitic and Islamic tensions because it occupies the unique position of having the highest percentage of both Jewish and Muslim populations in Europe. Increased Middle Eastern tensions and an influx of Muslim immigration have brought national and religious conflicts to a boiling point in France, and instead of a crisis of memory, France now must grapple with a crisis of identity, and reexamine the parameters of French identity.

So, for my Senior Integrated Project, I would like to investigate the process of selective memory of the Holocaust and situate it in the context of contemporary French discussions of national identity. To what extent did the French accept or repudiate the responsibility for their complicity with the Nazis, and what is the legacy of this decision in France today, not simply as it pertains to the status of French Jews, but as a player in French self-identity, and France's relation to other minority groups? How does this incomplete sense of accountability inform France's policies towards Jews, Muslims, and more recent immigrant groups, such as the Roma? Is the present notion of who is eligible to be truly French hindered by France's inability to answer this question in its past?

For my internship, I would like to examine how France chooses to remember the Holocaust—and in particular the Jews whose last glimpse of France was from behind a fence at Drancy, Pithiviers, or other French transit camps, before being directly transferred to a Nazi death camp. A possible location for an internship would be an organization such as La Fondation

de la Mémoire de la Shoah (The Foundation for the Memory of the Holocaust) or La Fondation de la Mémoire de la Déportation (The Foundation for the Memory of Deportation), both of which are based in Paris. Any internship that deals with the preservation and construction of France's memory of the Holocaust, such as a museum or archive center, would be an ideal position.

To supplement my SIP, I intend to take the following courses: *History 234: Modern Europe, 1790s-1990s*, *Religious Studies 248: Holocaust and Post-Holocaust Responses*, *French 405: The Art of Speaking*, and an additional French history course taken during my semester abroad in France. The modern European history course will provide the general context for the political and social climate leading up to World War II and the Holocaust; as one of the particular focuses of the course is the experience of Jews and Muslims in Europe, the class will also serve as an introduction to the atmosphere of anti-Semitism as late as the 1990s. *Holocaust and Post-Holocaust Responses* will aid me in considering what form memory of the Holocaust could and should take, and expose me to analysis of personal accounts of that memory. *The Art of Speaking* is a conversation-based class focusing on contemporary issues in French politics and culture, with particular discussion of France's relation to the 'other.' Finally, as my project concerns the question of how the French chose to remember their role in the Holocaust, I feel very strongly that one of my core courses should be a modern French history course taken in France, so that I may have a more exhaustive sense of what knowledge the average French citizen receives about this particular period in their nation's history.

While one aim in participating in CISLA would be to achieve fluency in French, more importantly, I hope to obtain a broader understanding of the historical constituents of French identity and the legacies of this abominable past in contemporary French society.

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