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The Jewish Resistance in France during World War II: The Gap between History and Memory

Dr. Tsilla Hershco, March 1, 2007

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“ More than sixty years after World War II, the French are still obsessed with the memory of the Holocaust. Nevertheless, they give only minor attention to the important chapter of the Jewish Resistance in France. The Organization Juive de Combat, which played a crucial role in saving part of French Jewry, is almost absent from formal and public discourse. Emphasis is instead placed on the role of the French Righteous Gentiles, who are credited with saving three-quarters of the French Jewish community. This gap between history and memory largely results from political and social considerations, especially the dogmatic French refusal to acknowledge ethnoreligious or ethnonational divisions within the French Republic. Until France recognizes that Jews under the Vichy regime had to fight for survival in separate, autonomous Jewish units, France will not complete the process of assuming responsibility for the Holocaust of French Jewry.

More than sixty years after the end of World War II, the memory of the Holocaust still haunts the French public discourse. The French manifest an almost obsessive attitude toward the Shoah, especially in connection with the current acts of anti-Semitism in the country. French public declarations often emphasize the importance of absorbing the lessons of the Holocaust so as to prevent the recurrence of similar crimes.[1] Philosopher Alain Finkielkraut vividly described how the recent resurgence of anti-Semitism in France evoked fears that the “old demons” were in force again.[2]

Nevertheless, the topic of the Jewish Resistance (Organisation Juive de Combat, OJC) in France is almost totally ignored. To a large extent, this is attributable to political considerations and to deep-rooted perceptions about the Jews and the state of Israel.

The Holocaust and the Jewish Resistance in France

France was conquered by Nazi Germany in June 1940 and was divided into two parts: the northern region, which was under direct German rule, and the southern one, where a so-called Free French regime was headed by Marshal Pétain with Vichy as its capital. The demarcation line passed from Bordeaux in the west to Geneva in the east.

The persecutions of the Jews, in which the Vichy regime played a dominant role in its collaboration with the Nazis, started shortly afterward and followed a similar pattern to the persecutions in other occupied countries. First came “Aryanization” measures, then the creation of detention camps, and finally massive deportations of Jews to the concentration camps in Eastern Europe. Out of a community of about three hundred thousand Jews in France on the eve of the war, 75,721, including 10,147 children, were deported. Most perished in the camps.[3] Only about 3 percent returned. The consequences could have been even worse if not for the Jewish Resistance.

The OJC was established to provide an organized response to the persecutions of the Jews in France, an issue that was not on the agenda of the general French Resistance. Jews were, in fact, overrepresented in the French Resistance compared to their percentage of the French population, but these Jews’ ultimate goal, too, was to liberate the French territory.[4] They did not aim at alleviating the plight of their fellow Jews, especially the thousands of new refugees who came to France from Nazi-controlled areas.

The OJC comprised about nine autonomous Jewish groups that were formed especially to help the Jews in France. The most prominent were the Jewish Scouts (EIF), the Jewish Army (AJ), the Organization of Assistance for Children (OSE), and the Movement of the Zionist Youth (MJS). These were established at the initial stages of the occupation and operated until the liberation of France.

The members of the various OJC groups cooperated in a wide range of activities. They rescued thousands of adults and children by providing them with hiding places or forged papers, and organized convoys to Switzerland and Spain.[5] They formed guerrilla organizations in the main cities of France (Corps Franc) and in the mountains (Maquis). They maintained a network of secret agents who transferred money from Switzerland to France and supplied it for the various underground activities and needs. Finally, following the Allied invasion in June 1944, they participated with the general French Resistance in fighting to liberate France.[6]

After the liberation, the French authorities acknowledged the OJC and awarded its members with Resistance medals, war decorations, and even small pensions.[7] Some OJC members from Zionist-oriented Resistance groups had taken an oath to join the struggle for a Jewish state after the war, and they continued their clandestine activities in the framework of the Hagana underground in Palestine.[8]

The Memory of the Holocaust in France

It took time for the Holocaust in France to become an integral part of the French “collective memory,” a term developed by the French philosopher Maurice Halbwachs. [9] After its liberation France almost completely ignored the painful issue of the

Vichy regime's collaboration with the Nazis and the catastrophe inflicted on French Jewry. The French authorities instead preferred to highlight the achievements of the French Resistance during the war. This tendency was motivated by domestic political considerations and especially by the wish to overcome the past internal conflicts between the Vichy regime and the Resistance. They aspired to build a new national unity around the myth of the Resistance. The French authorities also strove to rehabilitate their country politically and economically and to regain its international standing.[10]

The 1960s and 1970s saw gradual changes in the French attitude toward the Holocaust, including a growing awareness of the Vichy regime's extensive collaboration with the Nazis in persecuting French Jewry. This trend was enhanced by social and political circumstances, especially the growing criticism of the de Gaulle government. Literary works, films, and academic studies on the Holocaust shattered the dominant myth about the Resistance movement's broad influence on French society. Trials of the German war criminal Klaus Barbie (1987) and of French collaborators such as Paul Touvier (1992) and Maurice Papon (1997) provoked deep emotions in the French public. Subsequently, the historian Henri Rousso introduced the term "the Vichy syndrome" to describe the French obsession with the Holocaust.[11]

The 1980s and especially the 1990s brought formal acknowledgment by the French government of the Vichy regime's responsibility for the crimes against French Jews.[12] A special legislation (the Gayssot Law, July 1990)[13] prohibited Holocaust denial,[14] and 27 January was fixed as the date for annual Holocaust commemoration.

Early in the twenty-first century, France remains preoccupied with the Holocaust of French Jewry and of European Jewry generally. The French government and media devoted major attention to the sixtieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau in January 2005.[15] Holocaust studies gradually became a formal part of the French public-school curriculum,[16] and the issue of Holocaust denial still provoked a vehement public debate.[17]

The Memory of the Jewish Resistance

Nevertheless, the French public discourse and formal commemorations still devote very little attention to the Jewish Resistance in France and especially its important role in rescuing some of French Jewry. There is a gap between the great achievements of the OJC, as recorded in autobiographies, biographies, and academic researches,[18] and their part in the French collective memory. This disparity is only accentuated by the French tendency to focus on the role of French Gentiles in rescuing French Jews and especially children.

An example is President Jacques Chirac's historic speech on 16 July 1995 for the commemoration of the massive brutal arrests and detentions at Vélodrome d'Hiver (a stadium in Paris) on 16-17 July 1942. Chirac acknowledged France's responsibility for the Holocaust of French Jews while also emphasizing the role of French Gentiles in rescuing three-quarters of French Jewry.[19] He did not say a word about the OJC.

On 25 January 2005, Chirac reiterated this version of events for the much-publicized inauguration of the Memorial de la Shoah wall in Paris. In his speech he again acknowledged Vichy responsibility and strongly condemned the recent acts of anti-Semitism and racism in France. And he again paid homage to those French Gentiles who "by saving the lives of three-quarters of the Jews in France also saved the honor of France." [20] It would have been appropriate also to cite the efforts of the OJC, and especially those who gave their lives to rescue others.[21] Yet neither Chirac nor the representatives of the Jewish community[22] made any mention of this. Indeed, even the president of the French Committee of Yad Vashem, while referring to the rescue of children, ignored the contribution of the OJC.[23]

The 2,649 French Righteous Gentiles deserve, of course, to be eulogized.[24] It is, however, historically incorrect to attribute the rescue of French Jews solely to them while ignoring the OJC. The Jewish Resistance groups often were the driving force behind the activities of the French Righteous Gentiles. Although documents indicate that the Jewish groups had only about two thousand formal members,[25] they were organized and active from the beginning of the persecutions.

Moreover, the OJC members spoke French, looked French, and were integrated in French society. During the war they approached French institutions, especially Christian ones, with requests for assistance in sheltering Jewish adults and children. Thus, the acts of rescue by French Gentiles often stemmed from OJC initiatives. Furthermore, the OJC groups regularly supplied money and food coupons to Jews and often maintained contact with the children and babies who were put in the custody of Christian institutions and families.

A Gap between History and Collective Memory

The collective memory not only encompasses the historical facts but also reflects present political and social considerations as well as aspirations for the future. Accordingly, the very choice of what is included and excluded from the collective memory is significant. The French neglect of the OJC's role can be understood in terms of the past, present, and future dimensions of the collective memory.

The first possible explanation for the gap between history and memory concerns the objective circumstances after the war. Many young members of the OJC wished to return to normalcy and reintegrate in French society. After more than four years of dangerous clandestine activity, they wanted to put aside the painful memories and rehabilitate their personal and professional lives. Even those OJC members who wished to join the Jewish community's leadership were shunted aside by the old guard of experienced politicians who had headed the Jewish community before the war. In addition, hundreds of OJC members who had been disillusioned by the Vichy regime left France for Israel, where acclimatizing and contributing to the new state took precedence over promoting the memory of their past achievements.

Another explanation for the gap has to do with the French political system and how it perceives the French Republic. The French believe in the unity of the republic and refuse to accept ethnonational or ethnoreligious divisions within it. From this standpoint, the existence of a separate Jewish Resistance is incongruous and is identified with the pejorative term for tribal and communal loyalty (*communautarism*). This factor is reinforced by the French authorities' embarrassment over the recent Muslim-Jewish tensions in France.

In addition, excluding the OJC from the collective memory of the Holocaust appears connected to France's attitude toward Israel and its use of power. Already after World War II, French sympathy toward Jews seemed to depend on their prevalent image as victims. Israel's military successes in the Arab-Israeli conflict made it a constant target of French criticism.[26] This intensified after the 1967 War and reached a peak with the outbreak of the Second Intifada and France's one-sided support for the Palestinians.[27]

Shmuel Trigano maintains that this mindset entails a refusal to acknowledge Jews' rights to political existence and the legitimate use of force.[28] This may also apply to the French attitude toward the OJC; the image of the Jew as victim

precludes the image of the resisting, self-defending Jew.

Finally, the commemoration of the Holocaust but not of the Jewish Resistance fits the French vision of a new, improved world without violence. Endorsing the memory of the Holocaust as the ultimate symbol of evil helps the French demonstrate the need for a world where conflicts are resolved by dialogue. This is related to another central French aspiration: the building of the European Union. The memory of the Holocaust provides a central, unifying myth for developing the EU, which was founded on the principle of the negation of war.[29] In this context, the memory of the Jewish Resistance seems less relevant.

Thus, a significant change in the official French attitude toward the OJC is not likely in the near future unless Israel, via Yad Vashem, addresses this delicate issue. Amending the historical distortion regarding the OJC is not necessarily a complicated task, and may even prove compatible in many respects with both Israel's and France's interests and values.

Israel, for its part, should more actively incorporate the history of the OJC into its collective memory of the Holocaust. The new Holocaust History Museum of Yad Vashem includes an exhibit on the French Jewish Resistance. The OJC could also be given a more prominent role in public ceremonies and could be introduced in the school curriculum. Failure to do so would be unfortunate, since the OJC is a prime illustration of Jewish courage during the Holocaust.

For France, the accomplishments of the OJC could indicate how the universal values of the French Revolution, such as freedom, human rights, and the integration of French society, played a key role in the cultural heritage and motivation of OJC members. Such an approach could counteract reservations among the French Jewish community about commemorating a separate and distinct Jewish Resistance.

Finally, the French authorities, when referring to the Holocaust and to the rescue of three-quarters of the Jewish community in France, should accord homage to the OJC just as they do to the memory of the French Righteous Gentiles. This is a requirement of morality and of historical justice. Refraining from paying such homage signifies that France has only partially assumed its responsibility for the Holocaust of French Jewry. The French can more completely absorb the lessons of the Holocaust by unequivocally, formally acknowledging the role of the French Jewish Resistance.

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Notes

[1] See, e.g., Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin in a meeting of the French Interministerial Committee for the Struggle against Racism and Anti-Semitism, 27 January 2004, www.france.diplomatie.gouv.fr/actu/bulletin.asp?liste=20040128.html#Chapitre5. [French]

[2] Alain Finkielkraut, *Au Nom de l'Autre: Réflexions sur l'Antisémitisme qui Vient* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 2003). [French]

[3] Michael R. Marrus and Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy, France and the Jews* (New York: Basic Books, 1981); Serge Klarsfeld, *Le Mémorial de la Déportation des Juifs de France, 1942-1944* (Paris: Fondation Beate Klarsfeld, 1978) [French]; Serge Klarsfeld, *Memorial to the Jews Deported from France, 1942-1944* (New York: Beate Klarsfeld Foundation, 1985); René Poznanski, *Etre Juif en France Pendant la Seconde Guerre Mondiale* (Paris: Hachette, 1994). [French]

[4] Henri Michel, *Histoire de la Résistance en France, 1940-1944* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1980) [French]. On the Jews in the communist Resistance, see, e.g., David Diamant, *Les Juifs dans la Résistance Française 1940-1944* (Paris: Le Pavillon, 1971) [French]; Jacques Ravine, *La Résistance Organisée des Juifs en France 1940-1944* (Paris: Julliard, 1973) [French]; Adam Rutkowski, *La Lutte des Juifs en France à l'Epoque de l'Occupation (1940-1945)* (Paris: Centre de documentation juive contemporaine, 1975) [French]; Adam Rayski, *Nos Illusions Perdues* (Paris: Editions Balland, 1985). [French]

[5] On the convoys, see Tsilla Hershco, *Those Who Walk in Darkness Will See the Light: The Jewish French Resistance during the Holocaust and the Creation of Israel, 1940-1949* (Tel Aviv: Yad Israel Galili and Tcherikover, 2003), 132-56. [Hebrew]

[6] Lucien Lazare, *La Résistance Juive en France* (Paris: Stock, 1987) [French]; Hershco, *Those Who Walk*.

[7] The Archives of Avraham Polonski (one of the top commanders of the "Jewish Army"), 8D, Archives of Yad Tabenkin, Ramat Efal, Israel. [mostly French]

[8] Hershco, *Those Who Walk*, 167-353.

[9] Maurice Halbwachs, *La Mémoire Collective* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1997). [French]

[10] Henry Rousso, *Le Syndrome de Vichy: De 1944 à Nos Jours* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1990), 15-59. [French]

[11] *Ibid.*, 60-295.

[12] President Jacques Chirac, 16 July 1995, www.elysee.fr/elysee/elysee.fr/francais/interventions/discours_et_declarations/

1995/juillet/allocution_de_m_jacques_chirac_president_de_la_republique_prononcee_lors_des_ceremonies_commemorant_la_grande_rafle_des_16_et_17_juillet_1942-paris.2503.html [French]; Jacques Chirac, *Discours et messages de Jacques Chirac, Maire de Paris, Premier ministre, Président de la République*, (Paris: Les Fils et Filles des Déportés Juifs de France, 2004). [French]

[13] Jean-Claude Gayssot, a Communist Party deputy, initiated the law together with Laurent Fabius, at that time a Socialist Party deputy.

[14] Valerie Igounet, *Histoire du Négationisme en France* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2000). [French]

[15] See, e.g., *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 13 January 2005; *Le Monde*, 19 January 2005; *ibid.*, 25 January 2005; *Le Figaro*, 20 January 2005; *ibid.*, 27 January 2005; *Libération*, 21 January 2005; *ibid.*, 24 January 2005; *ibid.*, 27 January 2005; *Le Parisien*, 27 January 2005; *France Soir*, 28 January 2005; *La Croix*, 28 January 2005.

[16] Michel Barnier (French foreign minister), 18 October 2004, Roglit, Israel. Barnier conveyed the information in his speech for a commemoration ceremony. Roglit has a memorial site for the French Jews murdered in the Holocaust

www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/actu/bulletin.asp?liste=20041018.html#Chapitre7. [French]

[17] See, e.g., *Le Monde*, 12 October 2004; *ibid.*, 5 March 2005; *Libération*, 23 October 2004; *Le Figaro*, 3 February 2005; *ibid.*,

2 March 2005; *ibid.*, 27 April 2005; *Le Parisien*, 4 February 2005. In a special press conference, Prof. Bruno Gollnisch, a member of the National Front Party who teaches at the University of Lyon-III, expressed doubts about the existence of the gas chambers in World War II. See also the stormy public reactions that were triggered by the claims of National Front president Jean-Marie Le Pen that the German occupation of France was not particularly inhumane: *Le Monde*, 12 January 2005; *Le Figaro*, 18 January 2005.

[18] See, e.g., Jacques Lazarus, *Juifs au Combat* (Paris: Ed. Du Centre, 1947) [French]; Anny Latour, *La Résistance Juive en France* (Paris: Stock, 1970) [French]; Claude Vigée, *La Lune d'Hiver* (Paris: Flammarion, 1970) [French]; Les Anciens de la Résistance Juive en France, *Organisation Juive de Combat: Résistance/sauvetage, France 1940-1945* (Paris: Editions Autrement, 2002) [French]; Lazare, *La Résistance Juive*; Hershco, *Those Who Walk*.

[19] See note 12.

[20] President Jacques Chirac, 25 January 2005, www.elysee.fr/elysee/elysee.fr/francais/interventions/discours_et_declarations/2005

[/janvier/discours_du_president_de_la_republique_lors_de_l_inauguration_du_memorial_de_la_shoah.27546.html](http://janvier/discours_du_president_de_la_republique_lors_de_l_inauguration_du_memorial_de_la_shoah.27546.html).

[21] About two hundred OJC members lost their lives while performing their clandestine work.

[22] In their public speeches, the official representatives of the French Jewish community convey the same message about the rescue of three-quarters of the French Jewish community. See, e.g., Roger Cukierman (president of CRIF), 23 July 2002, www.crif.org/?

page=articles_display/detail&aid=79&returnto=dossier/detail_doss_type&dossyd=18&artyd=5%20&tg_id=6. [French]

[23] Richard Prasquier, president of the French Committee of Yad Vashem, 28 March 2003,

www.crif.org/?page=articles_display/detail&aid=966&returnto=dossier/detail_doss_type&dossyd=26&artyd=11%20&tg_id=6 [French].

Prasquier was interviewed on the occasion of the publication of Israel Gutman, ed., *Le Dictionnaire des Justes de France* (Jerusalem and Paris: Yad Vashem, Fayard, 2003). [French]

[24] Lucien Lazare, *Le Livre des Justes* (Paris: J. C. Lattès, 1993); Lucien Lazare, *Dictionnaires des Justes de France* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, Paris: Fayard, 2006). [French]. The statistic appears on the website of Yad Vashem, www1.yadvashem.org/righteous/index_righteous.html.

[25] Archives of Avraham Polonski, 7D-39; see also Hershco, *Those Who Walk*, 79-80.

[26] Tsilla Hershco, *Entre Paris et Jerusalem, La France, Le Sionisme et la Création de l'Etat d'Israël: 1945-1949* (Paris and Geneva: Editions Honoré Champion, 2003). [French]

[27] See Tsilla Hershco, *French Policy Regarding the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict during the Second Intifada: 2000-2005*, Mideast Security and Policy Studies, Begin-Sadat (BESA) Center for Strategic Studies, Bar-Ilan University, July 2006, www.biu.ac.il/SOC/besa/MSPS68.pdf.

[28] Manfred Gerstenfeld, interview with Shmuel Trigano, "Europe's Distortion of the Meaning of the Shoah's Memory and Its Consequences for the Jews and Israel," *Post-Holocaust and Anti-Semitism*, 42, 1 March 2006, www.jcpa.org/phas/phas-042-trigano.htm.

[29] See note 16; Robert Solé, "Le cauchemar sans fin," *Le Monde*, 29 January 2005. [French]

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