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Stepping on Burning Lava: Irène Némirovsky, French Bourgeois or Jew?

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In her book, *Numbered Days: Diaries and the Holocaust*, Alexandra Garbarini offers a historical conceptualization of Jewish Holocaust testimonies. Placing the identity “Jew” in the context of the vast cultural melting pot of Europe, she explains, “during this period, Jews integrated to varying degrees into the societies in which they lived, creating new divisions among themselves as well as complex modern individual identities.”¹ This concept of a complex identity within Jewish Holocaust memory appropriately characterizes the writer Irène Némirovsky, a French-assimilated Russian Jewish immigrant. In analyzing various writings of Irene Némirovsky, her letters, short stories, and personal writing notes reveal the modes in which Némirovsky defined her identity in the midst of a world war. Némirovsky’s life follows an evolution in identity, beginning with her first full-length novel *David Golder* and its accompanying interviews both before and after the rise of Nazism, the short story “Fraternité,” a letter to the Vichy president, Philippe Pétain, before her arrest in 1942, and ending with her unfinished final book, *Suite Française*. Ultimately, this author will define her contribution to Holocaust memory as a woman torn between conflicting identities.

A Russian-born daughter of a wealthy Jewish family, Irène Némirovsky’s family fled Russia to escape the oppressive conditions of the pogroms.² By the 1920s, Némirovsky had established herself as a critically acclaimed writer. Némirovsky had a great dislike for her mother as well as her Jewish heritage. As a young girl, she developed a romantic view of the French country and people, leaving her a desire to embody this identity. She attempted to gain French

¹ Alexandra Garbarini, *Numbered Days: Diaries and the Holocaust*, (Yale University Press, 2006), 9.

² Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, "Irene Nemirovsky," *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia* (1 March 2009) Jewish Women's Archive, <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/nemirovsky-irene> (Viewed on September 2, 2013).

citizenship multiple times, even converting herself and her family to Catholicism, but she was denied each time. Irène and her husband, Michel Epstein, had two daughters between them, Denise and Elisabeth. By the early 1940s, many anti-Jewish statutes issued by the French government began to affect Irene and her family. In September of 1940, Némirovsky's self-identification took a blow, as "the qualification for being French no longer depended on values or culture, under the new regulations they were based on... genealogical criteria."³ All Jews in the Occupied Zone were required "to register with state authorities... before 20 October."⁴ Husband and wife, Michel Epstein and Irène Némirovsky, dutifully replied to this mandate, upon the advice of a trusted friend. Némirovsky's resolve to "never abandon" the land of her childhood home also played a great role in the couple's complacency in obeying the new census laws. Presumably, the couple hoped to wait out the occupation in the hope that the occupied government would never fully give up its French bureaucracy.

As the small family attempted to outlast the German occupation in the small French village of Issy-l'Evêque, Irene began work on *Suite Française*, of which she would only finish two of the five intended sections.⁵ Before beginning this work she referred to as her most important and defining work, Némirovsky wrote four shorter stories in the autumn of 1939. She drew most of her inspiration for these stories from the momentous events of September 1939: "the declaration of war, her return to Paris, [and] the anticipation of the disaster."⁶ Némirovsky spent most of time in Issy-l'Evêque, especially the winter of 1939 to 1940, apprehensively

³ Olivier Philipponnat and Patrick Lienhardt, *The Life of Irène Némirovsky: 1903-1942*, Trans. Euan Cameron (London: Chatto & Windus, 2010), 314.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Philipponnat and Lienhardt, 293.

⁶ Philipponnat and Lienhardt, 293-294.

following the course of events as more and more countries fell under Nazi control.⁷ In one of her working notebooks, she writes in April 1940: “Norway and Denmark invaded. Bad feeling.”⁸ On Monday, July 13, 1942, German gendarmes arrived without warning to arrest Némirovsky. After her arrest, the gendarmes took Némirovsky to the police station at Toulon-sur-Arroux. Once she was taken into custody, the identity she previously constructed and with such care throughout the entirety of her life ceased to exist. Rather, the “novelist, ...mother, ...wife, ...Russian, ...Frenchwoman” no longer survived; now, “she was just a Jew.”⁹ As was the predominant fate of most deported Jews and other undesirables, Irène Némirovsky perished after finally ending her journey at Auschwitz Birkenau, followed soon after by her husband, Michel. Irène Némirovsky left behind countless novels, short stories, and both finished and unfinished manuscripts that increasingly reveal aspects of her self-definition as she approaches her final days. However, until an unprecedented award was issued posthumously, Némirovsky’s story remained almost unknown in modern society.¹⁰

In analyzing the writings of Irène Némirovsky, Susan R. Suleiman’s definition of a “crisis of memory” adds a layer of complexity in situating Némirovsky’s works within either collective history of the Second World War, collective Holocaust memory, or both. In relation to the “question of self-representation,” Suleiman defines a “crisis of memory” as a “moment of choice, and sometimes of predicament or conflict, about remembrance of the past, whether by individuals or by groups.”¹¹ While this definition in and of itself less than ideally describes Némirovsky’s particular situation, it does relate to Irène Némirovsky’s social predictability in

⁷ Philipponnat and Lienhardt, 297.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Philipponnat and Lienhardt, 377.

¹⁰ Flitterman-Lewis, "Irene Nemirovsky," Jewish Women's Archive.

¹¹ Susan R. Suleiman, *Crises of Memory and the Second World War*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), 1.

terms of self-identification in the midst of the modern idea of collective memory and experience. Contrasted to Suleiman's discourse, the legacy and search for self-identity as displayed in the writings of Némirovsky complicate the idea of a single, collective memory of the Holocaust. Némirovsky better coincides with Suleiman's disclaimer following her introductory definition: "any study of Holocaust memory must take account of local or even individual specificities if it is to avoid the banality of pious generalization."¹² In light of this disclaimer, classifying the writings of Irène Némirovsky risks overgeneralizing her experience, or potentially separating her oeuvre from Holocaust testimony as a whole. Therefore, where does Irène Némirovsky's literary contribution to Jewish Holocaust testimony fit into the present classification of such testimony?

One of her earlier writings, *David Golder*, Irène Némirovsky's first full-length novel, was published in 1929, and it quickly became a best seller.¹³ The book would later be adapted to the film screen in 1931, "starring Harry Baur in Julien Duvivier's first sound film about an unhappy Jewish patriarch."¹⁴ *David Golder* follows the life of a Russian-born Jewish immigrant until his ultimate death near the end of his life at sea. More than anything, this story reflects the consequences of a life sold into superficial prosperity, a life without pure love. Golder spends his days building a financial security that ultimately reveals its fragile nature. As his health declines, so do the attentions and loyalties of his wife and child. In the end, he voyages back to his first home on the Black Sea to secure his daughter's financial security to the ultimate end of preventing an unwanted marriage after his death.¹⁵ Despite all these actions, Golder eventually perishes alone at sea, leaving his lecherous family with nothing left.

¹² Suleiman, *Crises of Memory and the Second World War*, 2.

¹³ Flitterman-Lewis, "Irene Nemirovsky," Jewish Women's Archive.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

The Jewish nature and overarching theme of *David Golder* is established efficiently in the first chapter through Némirovsky's perceptive descriptions and the fact that every character in the novel is of Jewish heritage. A recurring motif that surfaces in her later descriptions of Jewish characters, both in *David Golder* and in successive works; Némirovsky portrays her title character as "a thin little Jew with red hair, pale, piercing eyes, worn-out boots and empty pockets..."¹⁶ Némirovsky also establishes a vivid portrayal of the stereotypical Jewish cliché of hoarding wealth through the financial world of Golder. From the beginning of the novel, Golder contemplates and finds himself faced with death and what the finality of life means for his superficial existence. "Confronted with death, Golder becomes horror-stricken, a small Jewish man alone again."¹⁷ Not only is his impending death given a reckless aura by the author, but also the love Golder feels for his family, especially his daughter, is described as foolish and as a laughable emotion, serving to keep him alive. Throughout her skilled descriptions of people and events, Philipponnat and Lienhardt argue that she would never admit the degree to which her own story pervaded that of David Golder's. *David Golder*, Némirovsky's first successful book, met with both negative and positive feedback regarding the content of the novel, but all acknowledged the remarkable insight and vivid descriptions she applied to her characters; most critics cited her impressive writing ability.

While there are many instances within *David Golder* in which Némirovsky critically and vividly portrays characters of Jewish origin, especially the title character and his business partner, Simon Marcus, her interviews regarding the novel, both during its initial release and after the rise of Nazism in Europe, show more evidently her changing perceptions of her national, ethnic, and personal identity. While initial responses to her writing commented solely

¹⁶ Némirovsky, *David Golder*, 11.

¹⁷ Philipponnat and Lienhardt, 138.

on the novel's literary merit, not long after, accusations of anti-Semitism surfaced. To these accusations, she responded ironically, "I'm accused of anti-Semitism? Come now, that's absurd! For I'm Jewish myself and say so to anyone prepared to listen."¹⁸ Contrasting to later insinuations of self-distancing, or even self-identification as a higher ranked foreign Jew, this blatant and blunt assertion of her Jewish heritage never appears in later interviews. In response to later accusations that she was unaware or in denial of the power she gave anti-Semites by describing Jews in the fashion in which she did in *David Golder*, Némirovsky replied, "Nevertheless, that's the way I saw them..."¹⁹ Yet another example of Irene Némirovsky's refusal to conform to "so-called communal reactions," as her recent biographers termed it. Her refusal to conform to traditional perspectives and genres fell into multiple categories, namely her treatment of her Jewish characters and even the use of lewd actions and vulgar language by her characters.

Némirovsky even swayed initially hostile critics with her insinuations that the negative attributes of *Golder* were not due to his Jewishness, but rather "because he has stopped being [a Jew]."²⁰ While the Jewish writer who interviewed Némirovsky and claimed she sought to undermine her own people eventually wrote a retraction article defending Némirovsky's license as a fiction writer, the same writer also defined Irene Némirovsky as an outlier to both her Russian and Jewish heritages. When interviewed at a later date regarding the ambiguous, yet seemingly anti-Semitic nature of *David Golder*, Irène Némirovsky admits to the influence of the time period on her ability to write the novel in the capacity in which it was written. At the time she wrote the novel, the threat of Nazism and Hitler was barely a faint murmur to the life of 26-year-old Irene Némirovsky. She explained, "It is absolutely certain that had there been Hitler, I

¹⁸ Philipponnat and Lienhardt, 164.

¹⁹ Philipponnat and Lienhardt, 165.

²⁰ Philipponnat and Lienhardt, 168.

would have greatly softened *David Golder*, and I would not have written it in the same way.”²¹ Not only does this comment reflect a life reality that people change as their circumstances and reality changes, but also Némirovsky shows a change in her perception of stereotypical Jewish identity in her writing.

Written in 1936, “Fraternité,” or “brotherhood” in English, is a short story of Irène Némirovsky published posthumously. At the time, her publisher rejected the transcript, but the topic seems very reminiscent of her own life in hindsight. In reading the source, Némirovsky writes this short story to come to terms with her own conflicting identities, seemingly embodying her own grappling between the racial identity of Judaism fused with national heritage and a personal desire to claim a new cultural identity in the story’s protagonist. Written during the same year Hitler invaded the Rhineland, the story reflects an uncertain time for the French people as the Nazis moved further west. As in many of her other works, Némirovsky meant for this story to reach wide, albeit French, audiences by attempting to release it through her publisher. However, given its rejection by her publisher, the document itself has not reached a wider audience until more recently when it was compiled into a collection of short stories by publisher, *Vintage Books*.

“Fraternité” opens with a developed description of Némirovsky’s protagonist, Christian Rabinovitch. She paints almost literally a picture of this reluctant Jew in her description: “He was a thin, frail, hunched man... his dry skin looked starved of nourishment; his nose was excessively long and pointed; his lips, also dry, seemed parched by a thousand-year-old thirst, an affliction passed on from one generation to the next. ‘My nose, my mouth, the only specifically

²¹ Philipponnat and Lienhardt, 164.

Jewish traits I've kept.”²² In describing this man, she explores the concept of “inassimilability.” As a concept, Némirovsky shows its validity not in the obvious choice of the supposed relative of Rabinovitch, a recent Russian émigré, that he encounters at the train station. The true culprit of “inassimilability” is Christian Rabinovitch himself; “despite his tweeds, his chauffeur and his odd manners, [he] endures his own pogrom in his soul.”²³ A mirror of her own struggles to obtain French citizenship, Rabinovitch is the counterpart of Némirovsky’s own grappling between her heritage as a Russian Jew and assimilating to reluctant French culture.

The plot and character development in “Fraternité” show Némirovsky’s growing struggle with her identity, including concepts of “Jew,” French culture, and oppressive. Each of these ideas deal with the theme of an identity crisis, dealing with the protagonist’s struggles with assuming age-old identities of generations past (Jew), while only wishing to claim new identities (French bourgeois). At a critical point in the story, Christian Rabinovitch, the protagonist, expresses that there is a “gulf” between himself and a Russian Jew he meets who shares his last name. This presumed distance and ensuing conflict between identities not only remains a major theme in this story, but also continues into Némirovsky’s other works. By using character development, and contrasting successful and wealthy Christian with a scrappy, humble Russian Jew, Némirovsky attempts to prove that despite his attempted shedding of identity, Christian remains a Jew at his core. Similar to Rabinovitch situation, Némirovsky is never able to shed either her identity as a foreigner or her identity as a Jew, at least in the eyes of the French state. During the Nazi occupation, foreign Jews were treated more harshly than French Jews; both practice and legislation favored French-born Jews to foreign-born Jews. This atmosphere was

²² Irène Némirovsky, “Fraternité,” 124.

²³ Philipponnat and Lienhardt, 252.

felt by Némirovsky and came through in her writing, both in her short story, “Fraternité,” and in later writings.

The events of the Second World War leading up to Némirovsky’s eventual deportation to Auschwitz not only influenced her creative oeuvres, but also influenced her self-identification. Némirovsky obviously felt the impending tragedy that would fall on her and her family in writing a letter to the Vichy government, or the collaborationist French government, president, Philippe Pétain. Published by most recent biographers, Philipponnat and Lienhardt, her letter shows not only an underlying faith in the French societal system, but she also displays a continuation of contemporary, and even modern, ideas of a class system, applying this hierarchy to both Jews and foreign-born Jews. She writes,

I cannot believe, Monsieur le Maréchal, that no distinction is made between those who are unwanted and those respectable foreigners who, if they have been shown princely hospitality by France, are aware of having made every effort to deserve it. I therefore beg to request that my family and I should be included in this second category of people, that we may be allowed to live freely in France and that I may be allowed to carry out my work as a writer.²⁴

Philipponnat and Lienhardt focus on the knowledge this letter implies: “at least this petition was proof that her forebodings were accurate.”²⁵ However, this document also shows elements of how Némirovsky defined herself. Without the benefit of hindsight, Némirovsky’s actions fall perfectly in line with her unwavering faith in French society and culture. Though she acknowledges her own foreign status, she refuses to fit the generalized classification presented by the new laws that emerged just before this letter was postmarked. She instead saw herself as a

²⁴ Philipponnat and Lienhardt, 312.

²⁵ Philipponnat and Lienhardt, 312.

privileged status as a writer with many connections in Paris.²⁶ Despite later yielding to the edict with her husband, this action was only done upon the advice of a family friend, who was in the French bureaucratic system himself. The couple's change of heart only further shows Irene's trust in the French system and belief that she would see the end of the situation in which she found herself in the early 1940s.

One of her final novels before her death in 1942, Irène Némirovsky wrote *Suite Française* after fleeing to the French countryside to escape the persecution of both the French collaborationist government and the Nazis themselves. She was unable to finish the manuscript before her arrest and following death in 1942, but her daughters, Denise and Elisabeth, succeed in saving the partial novel in a suitcase while on the run. This recently published novel includes not only the first two of five intended novellas, as well as includes her personal notes on all five sections in an Appendix of the book published in 2007. By the time the Germans invaded France, the Némirovsky family, including Irène, her husband, and their two daughters, was forced to flee to the village of Issy-l'Evêque in the French countryside. Given the timeline, it implies that as Némirovsky wrote her novel, she wrote of the events as they occurred in real time. She described writing her final oeuvre as working "upon burning lava."²⁷ She believed that "this is what should distinguish the art of our times from that of others, it is that we sculpt the actual moment, we work on things that are highly topical."²⁸ As she wrote *Suite Française*, Némirovsky was constantly referring to this novel as her musical composition, comparing her methods to those of Leo Tolstoy. She meant for this to be her masterpiece. In conjunction with her motive for

²⁶ Philipponnat and Lienhardt, 310.

²⁷ Philipponnat and Lienhardt, 364.

²⁸ Ibid.

writing, she sought to reach a wide, if primarily French speaking, audience. Presumably, she would have wanted her novel translated into many languages.

Within the section of Appendix I, Némirovsky's personal notes over the sections were translated and organized posthumously. She critiques the concept of community as used in the political sense in the way contemporary "tyrants" wished to show society as one, monolithic "community." She challenges this idea in her notes, and it portrays a constant worry of hers to show her own individuality amidst oppression. Especially in her notes, Némirovsky uses the metaphor of musical composition in comparison to her writing, using musical concepts to enhance both the practice of writing and her final product. Rhythm helps to show her persistent desire to create a musical narrative in her writing. Just as often as she refers to her desires, she expresses concern and "worry" that her desires will not be realized. Némirovsky is trying to prove that her experience can stand the test of time, despite her identity. She is constantly seeking to use the French as a locus of her project to further identify herself as French first and foremost. She primarily focuses on French characters and their development, possibly attempting to further her validity in understanding the French. The author makes assumptions that her audience will understand and was privy to the occurrences of the war in France. Also in the appendix, Némirovsky wonders what effect world circumstances have on her identity: "My God! What is this country doing to me? Since it rejects me, let us consider it dispassionately, let us watch it lose its honour and its life blood... Let us keep a clear head. Harden our hearts. Let us wait."²⁹ This reaction draws from popular bitter recollections of the state of the French state in early 1942.³⁰ As the French state gradually and continually rejected her on the basis of imagined

²⁹ Némirovsky, *Suite Française*.

³⁰ Philipponnat and Lienhardt, 361.

ethnicity, Némirovsky only continued to be patient for the returning of the country she had grown to love as a child.

Much of these correspondences mimic similar concerns felt by many refugees during this time. However, given Némirovsky's previously bourgeois status, her desires constantly seek to reinstate her former status of life before the rise of Nazism. Némirovsky is certainly true to her own struggles and concerns with her identity in the midst of a war-torn continent, however, Némirovsky also alludes to her own reactions, struggles, and desires through her stories, characters, and written notes. However, her thoughts and the course of her identity will never be fully realized because of her death. Thus, her work ultimately remains unfinished. *Suite Française* will never be finished in the capacity in which it was meant to be; it will forever remain incomplete. Even the outcome of the war was an unknown reality to Némirovsky, which could have greatly altered her eventual end product had she lived to finish it. Much like her assertion after its publication that David Golder would have been written differently if Hitler had been in power as she wrote it, the public will never know the outcome of this comment if applied to *Suite Française*. Némirovsky obviously lacked the benefit of hindsight, writing her story without knowing the ultimate ending to both her story and the story of World War II.

Given the extraordinary circumstances surrounding the author and the writing of *Suite Française*, a Jewish Quarterly article by Tadzio Koelb asks whether the success of the novel was due to literary merit or rather to the aforementioned circumstances surrounding Némirovsky's death and how the manuscript managed to survive. Even early on in her career, literary critics made accusations of anti-Semitic sentiments, such as the comments of contemporaries in

reference to her first full-length novel, *David Golder*.³¹ However, this was not the case with *Suite Française*. Most likely due to the late publication of *Suite Française* in the midst of a period of great demand for Holocaust testimony, this novel met with great public success in France and in many other countries and languages. Positive critical perspectives surrounded the posthumous publication of Némirovsky's final novel, adding to the reception and analysis of her testimony. It remains to be seen whether the reception of *Suite Française* would have been as welcoming if it had been released immediately following the Second World War. *Suite Française* could have met the same fate as Anne Frank's diary, at least in as much as finding difficulty in both finding interested publishers and readers.

Suite Française is a specific case within the oeuvre of Irène Némirovsky. Because of the fact that this final novel was written in the course of the events about which she was writing, *Suite Française* might more aptly be compared to discourses on diary writing of Holocaust. Alexandra Garbarini's piece attempts to classify the plethora of Jewish diary writings from the Holocaust and proposes a way to view and conceptualize Jewish experience: "I will try to avoid suggesting that Jews were ennobled by their suffering. To do so would invest their misery with an ultimate meaningfulness, as if they had derived some positive benefit from it."³² Némirovsky also exhibits similarities with another of Garbarini's tenants of collective diary writers in terms of her observations on the motivations of writers: "Rather, it seems to me the 'imperative to document' was inseparable from the 'imperative to live.'"³³ Throughout many of her notes, interviews, and conversations with others Némirovsky failed to separate her profession of writing from her concept of living, continuing to write even in relative exile. However,

³¹ Tazio Koelb, "Irène Némirovsky and the Death of the Critic," In *Jewish Quarterly* (September 2008).

³² Garbarini, 5.

³³ Garbarini, 5.

Némirovsky's experience in writing her literary testimony separates from Garbarini's analysis of Holocaust diaries on the subject of reluctance to write. Garbarini argues that, "...in many cases, they bore witness to their experiences with the deepest reluctance."³⁴ Rather than simplifying and neatly classifying Némirovsky's contribution to Holocaust testimony, comparison to the wide array of diaries produced during the Holocaust further complicates, and even oversimplifies Némirovsky's contribution to Holocaust memory.

Irène Némirovsky evokes a personally distant connection with both her Jewish heritage and her Russian, foreign heritage throughout her writing. Unlike the modern perceptions of Jewish Holocaust testimony, Némirovsky's literary works deal with emotions and concerns of a non-identifying Jew through fictional stories, as well as in her notes and letters, through her use of fiction, and also through her failure to claim the Nazi-defined identity of a Jew. Her views of Jewish people were not the expected response from a writer who was, herself, of Jewish heritage. Even up until the period of her life spent in hiding in Issy-l'Evêque, Némirovsky continued to rationalize and validate her choices of Jewish protagonists and her often harsh descriptions of them to the public: "No subject is 'taboo' in literature. Why would a people refuse to be seen as they are, with their good qualities and their faults?"³⁵ Continuing her argument for her literary choices from *David Golder*, she provides a subjective explanation near the end of her life: "This was how I saw them."³⁶ Némirovsky refused to politicize her writings or her opinions and descriptions of Jewish people.

Némirovsky's role in the overarching genre of Holocaust testimony is not immediately evident. Garbarini describes two main categories in analyzing "cultural activities," or products of

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Philipponnat and Lienhardt, 303.

³⁶ Ibid.

culture created by those within the culture, or, more specifically, testimonies, of the Holocaust prior to the 1960s: a means of escapism or a means of affirming “Jewish viability and spiritual resistance.”³⁷ Fitting Némirovsky into an “escapist” role is too simplistic and limits a critical analysis of her. A more traditional escapist role in which she writes to elude the horrors and tragedies surrounding her fails to adequately define Némirovsky’s experience, rather, the source from which she wishes to escape changes. In reality, she is more ambivalent, or at least she cares less, about the events surrounding her, and her main concern is escaping her own identity. While most of her writings acknowledge the changing events in France surrounding her and often express concern for the outcomes, her crisis of identity, between her foreignness, both as a Jew and as a Russian, and her desire to be French, takes precedence. Molding her to fit an image of “Jewish viability and spiritual resistance” during the Holocaust also falls short. Furthermore, later discussions of Holocaust testimony classification fail to include Jews who reject their heritage or choose to not identify as a “Jew” using the Nazi definition of the word. Interestingly, Garbarini later poses a more accurate depiction of Némirovsky’s unintended testimony: “writing did not merely reflect their experiences but also granted a sense of agency.”³⁸ However, rather than providing an outlet for Némirovsky to claim agency in terms of Jewish culture, she continued to claim French culture to the very end.

³⁷ Garbarini, 7.

³⁸ Ibid., 8.

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