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**Adam Rayski**, *The Choice of the Jews under Vichy: Between Submission and Resistance*. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005. xvi + 388 pp. List of interviews and testimony, acronyms of agencies, organizations, and movements, notes and index. \$35.00 U.S. (cl.) ISBN 0-268-04021-4.

Review by John F. Sweets, University of Kansas.

With the exception of a very brief “afterword,” *The Choice of Jews under Vichy* is a translation of the work first published in French thirteen years ago by Adam Rayski, who is a serious scholar of the Holocaust and the Jewish Resistance in France and was also a participant in the events he describes.[1] Perhaps not surprisingly, given Rayski’s double role as author and actor, the reader will discern both the author’s attempt to weigh evidence carefully and, occasionally, the passionate convictions of the former resister and activist in the Jewish section of the *Main-d’oeuvre immigrée* (MOI). The MOI, an organization created by the French Communist Party in the 1920s in order to channel behind the Party’s political objectives the energies of foreign workers recently arrived in France, was very active in wartime resistance actions in Paris, especially in armed attacks on the Germans. The fascinating history of the MOI was recounted in another excellent book, *Le sang de l’étranger*, that Rayski co-authored earlier with Stéphane Courtois and Denis Peschanski, a work that highlighted the important role played by foreigners in the French Resistance, a theme that had been neglected in prior studies of the Resistance.[2] Unfortunately, that excellent book has yet to find an English publisher.

In *The Choice of Jews under Vichy*, the author revisits aspects of *Le sang de l’étranger*, in that the Jewish section of the MOI contributed significantly to the survival of thousands of Jews. The MOI’s importance for Holocaust studies is a consequence of the early alarms concerning Hitler’s plans for the destruction of the Jews sounded in its underground newspapers and in its precocious commitment to fully clandestine life as the only real choice for survival for Jews in France under the German Occupation. To some extent the story of the MOI may be seen as representative of the author’s major thesis — that Jews were not merely “victims” of the Holocaust, but also among those who fought against the Nazi design most resolutely. Although I believe recognizing Rayski’s perspective as a former MOI activist is helpful in explaining some of his conclusions, I do not mean to imply that his book is narrowly focused around that organization.

One of a number of very fine studies produced in France during the 1990s that focused on the key question of how one can best explain both the deaths of one quarter (approximately 78,000) and, probably more astonishingly, the survival of the other three quarters of the Jews living in France between 1939 and 1944, Rayski, in agreement with other writers including Renée Poznanski, Susan Zuccotti, Georges Wellers, André Kaspi, and Asher Cohen, argues that an important part of the explanation lay with the attitudes and behaviors of significant numbers of non-Jews in France who rejected the Vichy Regime’s anti-Semitic policies and acted to hide and shield Jews from deportation.[3] As he notes: “In all cases nothing would have been possible without the help of non-Jews drawn from all social strata” (p. 164). More unique to the author’s account, however, is his insistence that agency should be granted to the Jews themselves for making the crucial decision that they had to take their safety into their own hands by going underground to live in hiding as fully as possible. He suggests that “the major factor in survival, especially after the 1942 raids, was to break with legality, which entailed partial or total civil disobedience” (p. 163). This was something that was bewildering and difficult for most people because it conflicted with their natural instincts. Particularly interesting is his depiction of the experience of Jewish children hidden by individuals or institutions and forced to adopt new personas in

this drama, lying or making up stories to suit the occasion, to the point that these new “facts” would become a second “reality” for them as they did their best to forget the world they had known. “Without underestimating the role of the ‘rescuers,’” Rayski writes, “we must also restore to the children their role as *actors*. Their achievement: losing their memory” (p. 170). The author argues very convincingly that the old cliché of the “Jew as victim,” which is a staple of Holocaust literature, needs to be qualified at the very least by the recognition that in a very unequal struggle that led to the deaths of millions across Europe, Jews fought back with the means at their disposal. And in the case of France, in large measure because they made the choice to disobey the Vichy Regime and the German occupation authorities, most of them survived.

In addition to this attempt to save the memory of the masses of Jews confronted by the Holocaust who refused to accept their fate passively, the author’s account provides an excellent chronology of the key events or turning points in the experience of Jews in France during the Second World War. He also highlights a secondary but important theme of recurring tensions and mutual distrust between French and foreign Jews. Among the key events of the period were the first mass arrests of Jews (mostly foreign Jews) in May, August, and December 1941 and their detention in concentration camps at Pithiviers, Beaune-le-Rolande, and then most notoriously at Drancy, the famous transit camp for Auschwitz through which almost all Jews deported from France passed. Although this aspect of the book is not particularly original, Rayski relates and interprets the events in a concise and compelling manner. As have others, he highlights the imposition by the Germans in June 1942 of the Yellow Star in northern France, and the beginning of the mass deportations that same summer in July and August in both the northern Occupied Zone and the southern “Free” Zone as key moments. At this time the sympathetic support of the gentile population and the conscious decisions of thousands of Jews to go into hiding coalesced in a combination that would produce safety for many seeking shelter. In describing the tragic round up of the Vélodrome d’Hiver in Paris in July 1942, Rayski emphasizes the very important point that while the French police had arrested and confined in the Vel d’Hiv 12,884 people (of whom 4,500 were children), almost as many on the original arrest lists containing 23,000 names escaped, to the great dismay of Heinz Röthke, the SS official in charge of the round up. Eight to nine thousand Parisian Jews escaped the dragnet, many of whom had been warned a couple of days before the roundup by a flyer printed in Yiddish and distributed by Jewish resisters, and others who simply reacted to what they saw going on around them when the arrests started.

As noted in contemporary public opinion reports, the brutality of the summer 1942 roundups, and especially reports of children being torn from their parents’ hands by the French police, provoked the first widespread movement of solidarity with the Jews from other French people. A few leading Catholic Church officials, most famously the Archbishop of Toulouse, Jules-Gérard Saliège, protested publicly against the inhumanity of these actions. Now, all over France, Jews began to assume that arrest meant deportation, and soon thereafter—observing that children and the elderly were being sent to that “unknown destination” to the east — that deportation meant death. This was a theme that was hammered home to them by the underground Jewish press as well, as it spread the news of the massacre of Polish and other Eastern European Jews and explained that, barring self-help through their own actions, the same fate awaited those in France. In these circumstances more and more Jews chose to go into hiding, and more and more French non-Jews agreed to support them. By contrast to this helpful popular reaction, Rayski, reaffirming the arguments of Robert Paxton and Michael Marrus in their classic *Vichy France and the Jews*,<sup>[4]</sup> makes very clear the significant responsibility that the Vichy government bore for its complicity in the Holocaust. As he writes: “Even without the gas chambers, the anti-Jewish persecution by Vichy bears all the marks of an absolute crime from the moment it was adopted” (pp. 117-18).

In describing the response of Jews in France to the serious threat facing them, the author explores the contrasting and often conflictual responses of French and foreign Jews. Reflecting his own behavior and attitudes at the time, Rayski is very harsh in his criticism of the Central Consistory, the highest Jewish

religious authority in France, and especially the *Union générale des Israélites de France* (UGIF – General Union of the Jews of France). The latter organization was the *Judenrat* or the French version of “council of elders” that the Germans used in every occupied country to involve the Jews in their own destruction under the guise of united representation and control over social service responsibilities for their fellow Jews. One may perhaps understand the author’s passion about this matter, but readers may find that his repeated condemnations of the UGIF and its leaders, notably Raymond-Raoul Lambert, are overdrawn. The more balanced assessment of the UGIF by Renée Poznanski concludes that, even though, as Rayski insists, its facilities sometimes were a trap for those arrested there, the UGIF was “neither a Gestapo front nor a Resistance organization.” Many of its members were involved in rescue efforts, and some of its leaders “conducted themselves valiantly, while others proved cowards.”<sup>[5]</sup>

For Rayski, as for Poznanski and others, the positions of the Consistory and of the UGIF reflected in part the fact that they were dominated by French Jews, long established and socially integrated in France, who tended originally to have greater faith in French political traditions and in the Vichy Regime than did the newly arrived immigrant and refugee Jews who were usually more politically sensitive to the Nazi menace and were much less well integrated into French society. There is no question that foreign Jews were treated much worse in France than the French Jews and, a carry-over from attitudes in the interwar period so well analyzed by David Weinberg in his *A Community on Trial: The Jews of Paris in the 1930s*,<sup>[6]</sup> it is clear that some of the French Jews blamed the foreign Jews, rather than the (clearly responsible) Vichy government and the Germans, for the troubles that befell them. Sadly, a number of French Jews believed, until the moment they were deported themselves, that only the foreign Jews would be deported and that this was not entirely a bad thing. Although pointing out these extremes of poisoned relations between French and foreign Jews, Rayski concludes, perhaps a bit too optimistically, that out of their common, if unequal, suffering, the Jews of France ultimately found their way to unity as represented by the *Conseil représentatif des Juifs de France* (CRIF), founded in the last weeks of the Occupation (and still in existence today) as a representative, umbrella organization, to speak for all of the Jews in France. The evidence the author presents of continuing strong differences between Zionist and anti-Zionist, Bundists, French and foreign, cultural and religious perspectives, and so forth, argues that the unity represented by the CRIF was, at best, tentative and fragile at that time.

In my opinion, the last third of the book in which Rayski describes in varying degrees of detail the variety of Jewish organizations involved in the Resistance, from the Scouts to the Jewish Army to the MOI, and addresses philosophical issues about Jewish views toward a Jewish State and on the nature of war is of less interest than the first sections. Here, and at some other points, the book is rather disjointed, with jumps from one topic to the next, made palatable by the use of frequent subtitles, but sometimes without an obvious logic. More disconcerting are lapses into episodic stories of individual resistance exploits which do add some intriguing personal content to his general account, but occasionally come across as idiosyncratic memorializing rather than historical analysis.

These slight reservations aside, this translation of Adam Rayski’s book, very adroitly handled by Will Sayers, is a welcome addition to the available English-language Holocaust literature. As François Bédarida’s very perceptive foreword to the volume notes, Rayski’s work offers a significant contribution to the history of this tragic era while projecting a thoughtful insight into the contemporary (1990s) debate on Jewish identity in French society.

## NOTES

[1] Adam Rayski, *Le choix des Juifs sous Vichy: entre soumission et résistance* (Paris: Editions La

Découverte, 1992).

[2] Stéphane Courtois, Denis Peschanski, and Adam Rayski, *Le sang de l'étranger: les immigrés de la MOI dans la Résistance* (Paris: Fayard, 1989).

[3] Renée Poznanski, *Jews in France during World War II* (Hanover, New Hamp.: Brandeis University Press, 2001); Susan Zuccotti, *The Holocaust, the French, and the Jews* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999); Georges Wellers, *L'Etoile jaune à l'heure de Vichy* (Paris: Fayard, 1973); André Kaspi, *Les Juifs pendant l'Occupation* (Paris: Seuil, 1991); Asher Cohen, *Persécutions et sauvetages: Juifs et Français sous l'Occupation et sous Vichy* (Paris: Cerf, 1993).

[4] Michael R. Marrus and Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France and the Jews* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1981).

[5] Poznanski, *Jews in France during World War II*, p. 488.

[6] David Weinberg, *A Community on Trial: The Jews of Paris in the 1930s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977).

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