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Amos Reichman, *Jacques Schiffrin: A Publisher in Exile, from Pléiade to Pantheon*. Foreword by Robert O. Paxton. Translated by Sandra Smith. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019. xvii + 220 pp. Photographs, notes, bibliography, and index. \$30.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-231-18958-3.

Review by William Cloonan, Florida State University.

In the twentieth century, Gaston Gallimard and Bernard Grasset were the titans of French publishing. Native-born French, they both possessed literary taste, a commitment to French and European culture, as well as confidence in both their judgment and their place in the French literary landscape. Amos Reichman notes in *Jacques Schiffrin* that toward the end of his life, Gallimard could maintain, presumably without any hint of irony, that “I am French literature” (p. 14). Although each exhibited that bizarre mixture of idealism and realism required to contemplate and then succeed in the publishing field, realism was their dominant quality. Grasset and Gallimard were keenly aware that there can be no success in publishing without healthy sales. The proverbial bottom line was as much a factor in their thinking as was literary quality, and this attitude is not to be scorned. A *maison d'édition* with some bestselling novels can better afford a series devoted to contemporary poetry.

In several significant ways Jacques Schiffrin was quite similar to his French counterparts. A man of literary taste with a deep commitment to European culture, he was certainly aware that a publishing house, whatever else it thought it was or whatever it tried to be, was a business, a way of making a living. Schiffrin's aim was high-quality publishing which would afford him a comfortable living and some recognition in French intellectual life. However, what sets Schiffrin apart from his more prominent contemporaries was that he was a Russian Jew, driven from his homeland by the Russian Revolution and then exiled from France during the Second World War and forced to live in the United States where he would never feel at home. Disowned by his birthplace and rejected by his adopted country, toward the end of his life Reichman describes Schiffrin as “stateless” (p. 174).

A less dramatic difference between Schiffrin and other publishers was that he was more deeply concerned with a book's physical appearance, its tactile qualities and physical form. This interest was at once aesthetic and practical. Schiffrin wanted to sell books that were beautiful to behold, but which would be, due to their smaller format, more suited to the exigencies of modern living. They could easily be transported in pockets and would take up less space in crowded apartments (p. 10). This attention to the size and feel of a book was apparent from his first publishing venture.

In 1922 Schiffrin, by then a refugee in Paris, launched *Éditions de la Pléiade*. Most of us probably thought the name was a reference to the famous group of French Renaissance poets, but according to Schiffrin's son, André, the allusion was to a collection of Russian classical poets (p.7). Certainly, in its early years, the *Pléiade* was heavily committed to Russian literature (p. 11). This *Pléiade* is the forerunner of the *Bibliothèque de la Pléiade* that Schiffrin began in 1931, and which became a part of the *Éditions Gallimard* in 1933. With this collection and the financial backing of *Gallimard*, the relatively young editor became a major presence in French cultural life. A naturalized French citizen with a growing family and a successful career, Schiffrin's future seemed assured. The bitter irony that Schiffrin could not have possibly grasped at that time was that the year of his professional "arrival" (1933) was also the year Hitler became Chancellor of Germany.

The run-up to World War II, Schiffrin's anxieties and frustrations during the Occupation, and his bittersweet return to prominence in the United States constitute the most riveting parts of *Jacques Schiffrin*. They are told with great clarity and attention to facts, yet they are also the most problematic parts of the book. Reichman's biography is essentially linear; it moves through the different passages in Schiffrin's life with great fidelity to what the publisher experienced. This is admirable, but Schiffrin was more than an individual: he was a pivotal figure in French, and to a lesser degree American, culture. His life intersected with events that challenged humanistic values and traditions. Reichman does not ignore this secondary, albeit important, aspect of the story he tells, but at times his treatment seems cursory.

For instance, Reichman notes that in 1936 Schiffrin accompanied André Gide to the USSR as his "friend, interpreter, and secretary, allowing Gide to write one of his most important political works, *Return from the USSR*, a criticism of the Soviet regime" (p. 17). Gide's essay turned out to be one of the most explosive documents of the pre-war French intellectual Left. It was a scathing critique of the Soviet system which did much to lessen Gide's prestige in leftist circles and led to a rather precipitous decline in his reputation. What was so striking about this incident was that it represented an abrupt about-face for Gide who had until that moment been quite sympathetic to the Soviet cause. It is hard to believe that Schiffrin did not play a significant role in Gide's sudden change of heart, a turnabout that contributed to rancorous disagreements in French thinking about the USSR. Violently opposed discussions of the Soviet experiment and its putative achievements would envenom intellectual debates in France up to and including the immediate postwar period. Schiffrin's role in this affair deserves more examination than Reichman provides.

Shortly after the beginning of the Occupation, Schiffrin was fired by Gaston Gallimard in obedience to Nazi orders that he make his publishing house *Judenfrei*. Schiffrin, suddenly more of a Jew than a French citizen, understandably became very nervous about finding a way out of France and to the United States. Reichman treats Schiffrin's frenzied and initially fruitless efforts to escape in great, at times moving detail. He describes the man's constant anxiety, disappointments, yet dogged persistence. When the harried ex-publisher finally got his family on a boat to America, the living conditions were disgusting. In his autobiography, which Reichman cites, André Schiffrin captures the humiliation and dehumanization of the Jewish passengers as well as their terrible suffering when he echoes Victor Brombert's description of their boat as a "floating concentration camp" (p. 64).

In his effort to flee France, Schiffrin was given moral and occasionally financial support by André Gide and Roger Martin du Gard, two of France's most prominent writers. Yet, as

Reichman remarks, “it is doubtful that either fully appreciated the danger their friend was in” (p. 55). Roger Martin du Gard thought that Schiffrin’s reaction was excessive (p. 56). Gide would only later admit that Schiffrin was probably right to leave (p. 76), and another artist friend, Julien Green, who encountered the Schiffrin family during their flight, seemed content with the bromide, “Here is a person ennobled by suffering” (p. 75).

These are the comments of intelligent anti-Nazis, deeply imbued with European humanism. Yet perhaps because of their intellectual formation with its Enlightenment values they were simply incapable of appreciating the radical nature of Hitler’s plans for the Jews, the fundamental challenge his ideas posed to commonly accepted norms of decency. In the initial reaction to the implementation of Nazi ideology, educated people were often blinded to the enormity of the threat, not necessarily by indifference, but by the illusion, inherent in their education, that enlightened peoples were bound to adhere to certain behavioral standards and limits. Reichman describes the acting out of this phenomenon in relation to an individual, but a broader consideration of the topic would have been helpful.

A related issue stems from comments Gide made in his *Journal* concerning “Jewish literature, in which any ideas of dignity are lacking. It is demeaning literature” (p. 161), and Schiffrin specifically: “...in spite of the profound and tender affection I have always had, and which continues to grow for Schiffrin, in whom, I must also say, that I saw very little of the faults that might be considered Jewish *defects*, but only their qualities” (pp. 163-164). Gide’s distaste for “Jewish literature” predates the war, but the remark about Schiffrin was made after World War II, after the full exposure of Nazi genocidal policies. Obviously, Gide was never a virulent antisemite, nor would he have condoned for a moment the attempted destruction of European Jewry. Yet his words reflect what, for lack of a better expression, might be termed the “gentlemanly antisemitism” long prevalent in Europe before the war. Any biography of Jacques Schiffrin is necessarily entwined with the history of the Jewish people in Europe, and comments like Gide’s raise issues that merit at least some discussion. Had the war fundamentally changed gentile attitudes toward the Jews, or would the prejudice against them merely revert to more traditional expressions? The fact that in his last letter to Gide, Schiffrin declared that “Men are monsters” (p.163), strongly suggests that he was not particularly sanguine concerning the new world emerging from the rubble of 1945.

On several occasions Reichman mentions Stefan Zweig, a prominent Austrian writer who, like Schiffrin, was forced into exile because he was a Jew. He went to Brazil where he was safe, but he could not overcome the depression caused by his uprooting and the apparent destruction of his long-cherished values. Eventually he committed suicide. Shortly before his death in 1942, Zweig finished *The World from Yesterday*. This is not simply a memoir of his life in Vienna; it is a lamentation for a world of intelligence, culture, and beauty he judged to have been irretrievably lost. This is probably what Schiffrin also thought about wartime and postwar France and Europe. Like Zweig, he was safe in a foreign country and even managed to reinvent himself as a successful literary editor, but he was never really happy in Manhattan or at ease with American culture.

If fragile health made Schiffrin’s postwar return to Paris unlikely, a much greater determination might have been the sense he got from former colleagues and even friends that he no longer had a place there. Gaston Gallimard claimed to want him to return, but would never agree to allow him to retake control of the *Pléiade*. For Roger Martin du Gard, Schiffrin was, along with himself, part of the “Old Guard,” the incarnation of a now dead literary and

cultural past (pp. 138-139). When Sartre, during a visit to the States, was asked whether members of the French refugee community would be scorned should they return to Paris, his reply was devastating: "It's much worse, they've been forgotten" (p. 140). Here again, a little more analysis of the seemingly sudden fall from grace of an older generation of French intellectuals would have been helpful, as would have been a deeper investigation of the reasons people like Gaston Gallimard did not want Schiffrin back in Paris.

Unlike many other French refugees, Schiffrin managed to learn English and reestablish his professional identity in the New World. In 1943, Jacques Schiffrin and Co. began publishing texts in French. The *maison* eventually "became the leading publisher of Francophone literature in the United States during World War II and made Schiffrin an essential go-between for European literature" (p. 88). Reichman makes the important point that "for Schiffrin, publishing during the Second World War was not simply a literary activity; books were 'weapons' of culture in a global conflict" (p. 87). Schiffrin was a French patriot who despite the trying circumstances he lived through always attempted to be to some degree *engagé*. Shortly after the outbreak of the war, he enlisted in the French army where he served during the *Sitzkrieg*, only to be mustered out before the real hostilities began, due to the discovery of the emphysema which would eventually kill him in 1950. For the author of his biography, Schiffrin was "in his own way participating in the Resistance" (p. 99).

If Schiffrin gained great respect in the French community for Jacques Schiffrin & Co., he gained fame in the United States for his work at Pantheon Books, a publishing house he founded with Kurt Wolff, a German editor compelled to flee Germany because of his Jewish origins. At Pantheon, the two publishers sought to replicate the format Schiffrin had created for the *Pléiade*, "cloth instead of leather, and naturally on 'Bible paper'...the same spine, same jacket, etc." (p. 99). In a more general sense, Pantheon represented "a kind of publishing that refused to sacrifice quality for profit or the ideal of a beautiful object on the altar of consumerism" (p. 96). One of Pantheon's first great successes was securing the rights to publish Camus' *L'étranger* in French.

Jacques Schiffrin was a gifted editor and publisher who, had circumstances been different, might have enjoyed professional success and social stability comparable to those of Grasset and Gallimard. Yet the upheavals of twentieth-century history, notably the Russian Revolution and World War II, turned what appeared to be an essentially sedentary man into an outcast and a wanderer. A non-practicing Jew, he suffered from the most virulent antisemitism the world had ever seen, but unlike many of his ethnicity, he managed to survive and even prosper, albeit in a country he could never call his own. In *Jacques Schiffrin: A Publisher in Exile, from Pléiade to Pantheon*, Amos Reichman provides a fine account of the events in the turbulent life of a gifted man who sought only to practice his trade in peace and tranquility.

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