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Julia Elsky, *Writing Occupation: Jewish Émigré Voices in Wartime France*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2020. xi + 273 pp. Notes and index. \$65.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9-78-1503613676; \$65.00 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9-78-1503614369.

Review by Nathan Bracher, Texas A & M University.

We owe a debt of gratitude to Julia Elsky for the extensive archival research and judiciously nuanced textual analyses that have enabled her to foreground the relatively neglected, yet richly significant writings of Benjamin Fondane and Jean Malaquais, while also providing fuller understandings of the better-known narratives of Roman Gary, Elsa Triolet, and Irène Némirovsky. Having come to France from Eastern Europe in the early twentieth century in hopes of pursuing literary careers, all of these *Jewish Émigré Voices in Wartime France* confronted antisemitism, the fall of France, the Nazi occupation, and the Shoah, inscribing these events on the pages of their various literary creations.

At the heart of their fertile artistic production were responses to questions of French language, literature, and nationality, particularly since their own lives were steeped in multilingual cultures—Yiddish, Hebrew, and Slavic—of their Eastern European origins. Though their personal itineraries and literary creations followed sharply contrasting, often tragic, destinies, all confronted crucial issues of inclusion or exclusion as Jewish writers seeking to make themselves heard in France precisely when questions of national, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural belonging were dramatically urgent. Triolet rejected particularism in favor of international anti-fascism. Némirovsky mirrored her own exclusion from the French nation, ultimately eliminating Jewish voices. But Fondane, Malaquais, and Gary integrated distinctly Jewish characters and speech, infusing distinct echoes of Yiddish and Hebrew into poetry and novels. The result, argues Elsky, is a European, even Jewish, Francophonie showing that French, though often construed as a dominant, imperial language, can be a transnational idiom expressing a multiplicity of cultures and identities.

Multilingualism, diversity, cultural mixing were familiar to these natives of Eastern Europe. Each language impacted intellectual prestige, socio-economic status, literary reputation, official nationality, and citizenship. Language moreover proved to be crucial for cultural identity, although Yiddish and Hebrew often conflicted with the demands of French as the idiom of intellectual prestige and literary renown. Some nevertheless crossed linguistic and cultural boundaries, challenging national identities that were sometimes matters of life and death. All were attracted to France as a cultural capital and all chose to write in French, the language that has long been central to the nation's sense of pride, belonging, and cultural achievement.

Inflexions of Yiddish and Hebrew were thus problematic for several reasons: given the exacerbated antisemitism of the 1930s, and then Vichy's explicitly anti-Jewish policies, these two "Jewish languages" were often viewed as alien, and accordingly stigmatized as unassimilable, even degenerate. Yet Fondane, Malaquais, and Gary neither abandoned nor forgot their Yiddish, Hebrew, and Slavic cultural roots, argues Elsky, noting "first, that language was the locus in which writers negotiated their positions"; second, that they "wrote in French about multiple languages and multiple senses of belonging—to countries, to political movements, and to Judaism—even when this sense of belong was being violently denied"; and finally, that they "responded to persecution by generating new conceptions of French and by creating new literature" (pp. 27-28).

Like many others who had come to France in 1923 in hopes of escaping Romania's violent antisemitism while participating in cosmopolitan creativity, Benjamin Fondane (Wechsler) inscribed a "Jewish Poetics of Exile" (chapter one's title) on the letter to his wife only five days before his deportation from Drancy to Auschwitz on May 30, 1944, signing it "Mielouchon, Vechsler Benjamin, known as Fondane," thus signifying his attachment to his Romanian Jewish origins, as well as to his French *nom de plume* (p. 29). Fondane's "Exercice de français," (1925), *Ulysse* (1933), and *L'Exode: Super flumina Babylonis* (1933-1944), all explore alienation from homeland, mother tongue, and spiritual roots, weaving themes of statelessness and wandering found in the biblical Exodus, the Babylonian exile, the second destruction of the Temple, and even leprosy together with the intemporal Homeric figure of classical antiquity. Fondane's writing was also informed by his own experience as a naturalized French Jewish expatriate of Romania fleeing the Nazi onslaught along with millions of others in the May-June 1940 debacle, as he subsequently revised these texts in the wake of Occupation persecutions and dangers.

Fondane found himself distanced from his origins and cut off from the France of aspirations, while his Yiddish and Hebrew cultural wellsprings were denigrated and ostracized. Yet language remained the crux of his existential and literary projects. He chose to write and rewrite these works in French, enriching the thematics of displacement with the realities of colonial domination and exclusion that betrayed promises of universalism. Having adopted *la langue de Molière*, Fondane nevertheless composed his poetry "in all of these languages at once," asserting "that no single language exists" (p. 60). He thus anticipated Derrida's paradoxical proclamation that "1. *We only ever speak one language.* 2. *We never only speak one language.*" (p. 61). The categorical violence of Fondane's arrest, detention, and murder at Auschwitz in 1944 makes his election of French as the language of his transnational, multilingual literary compositions all the more poignant.

Chapter two examines "Accents in Jean Malaquais's *Carrefour Marseille*." Though the Warsaw-born Malaquais (Wladimir Jan Pavel Malacki) became a citizen of the United States shortly after the Second World War, he was stateless in France when he won the Renaudot prize for *Les Javanais* in 1939, fought against the German invasion in 1940, and spent 1941 and 1942 in Marseille preparing his 1942 departure for Mexico. Fluent in Polish, German, and Russian, he always wrote in French—unhesitatingly, by desire and inclination, he insisted. Questions of language, and in particular the accents of speech often inflected with Yiddish, Slavic, or Hebrew lilt suggesting non-French origins, are at the center of his 700-page novel *Planète sans visa*, first published in 1947 by Doubleday as *World Without Visa*. The title aptly characterizes a Marseille teeming with a massive presence of international refugees and asylum seekers in transit, their

speech resonating with a wide range of rhythms and intonations in the streets and cafés of France's most important Mediterranean port city.

Without reproducing Yiddish or Hebrew expressions in his text as did Fondane, Malaquais managed to convey French echoes of these languages absent--most often disguised or concealed for fear of public reprobation or administrative sanction--from the site of exile throughout this novel. Malaquais uses the polyglot throng of refuge seekers' noticeably different manner of speaking French to depict the various plights of those experiencing geographic, cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic displacement, and more importantly to convey the rich strains of humanity so intimately bound to their maternal languages or linguistic heritage. Elsky underscores the paradox and aporia of presence and absence, trace and allusion, echo and shadow comported by the phonetic markers of difference in speaking. A "foreign accent" is a presence of and link to an absent past, a sign of dissimilarity to native speakers, yet a likeness to other outsiders. In the context of occupied France, an accent could indeed betray one's identity, not only exposing someone to public scorn, but also making a person vulnerable to exclusion, arrest, detention, and deportation by French or German authorities.

Whether from Spain, Lithuania, Germany, Russia, or Eastern Europe, the refugees faced incomprehension, prejudice, and rejection, particularly when their speech carried marks of Yiddish, all the more foreign due to its similarity to German, and vilified by the far right in France as corrupt and degenerate. But when one of Malaquais's characters, Pawel, can only use "Sonietchké" to convey his affection for his wife Sonia, Yiddish proves to be a language of love and tenderness. Without following any one story or set of central characters, Malaquais's vast panorama of people and their peculiar ways of speaking French in *Planète sans visa* foregrounds human diversity "by means of a few small, individual anecdotes, for which the only link is the destiny of a world that at once dies and is born anew from its ashes," as Malaquais himself put it (p. 75). While highlighting the cruelty of identities invoked by government administrations and border controls, Malaquais illustrates how language maintains close "bonds between people and places" (p. 92).

Examining "Romain Gary's Heteroglossia" in chapter three, "European Language and the Resistance," Elsky uses Bakhtin's concept to explore the mixing and dialogue of idioms found in Gary's French narratives of the war. While the Germans made French into a vehicle of Nazi propaganda, Gary's novels featured "dialogues in French, Polish, English, German, Russian, and Yiddish, as well as Hebrew prayer," thus presenting "French as the language of democracy that could encompass a wide range of languages--and therefore national identities--in one democratic European language" (p. 96). Affirming a "one hundred percent Jewish sensibility" (p. 120) stemming from deep ties to Yiddish culture and his mother, Roman Kacem, himself fluent in Russian, Polish, and French, familiar with Yiddish and Hebrew, nevertheless aspired to distinction in the Parisian idiom. Though giving several fictional accounts of his own background, national origin, and even name, Gary's commitment to the nation and prestigious literary language of his own election never varied, as amply evidenced by his service in the Forces aériennes de la France libre (earning distinction as a Compagnon de la Libération), and his remarkable, if rocky, literary career (marked by two Prix Goncourt novels).

Exiled in London from the Nazi stranglehold on Europe, working alongside other prominent French and Polish contributors to the monthly journal *La France Libre*, Gary celebrated the two nations' longstanding cultural and political alliance, as well as their "communion in pain" (p. 109).

The bonds of friendship between the two nations were expressed “in terms of literature and language,” (p. 106) considered as vital to both nations and their common aspirations for a peaceful European union. Gary’s novels further developed this ideal by placing several European languages, notably Yiddish and Hebrew, not only in juxtaposition but also in dialogue. This heteroglossia promoted the intermingling of multiple languages nested in Gary’s French texts as exemplifying democracy while forging a common European bond. Elsky thus advances a new interpretation of Gary’s stance toward his linguistic and cultural heritage: without espousing an exclusively Jewish identity as suggested by Myriam Anissimov, nor remaining too polyvalent to take on any identity, as proposed by Nancy Huston, Gary embraced Jewish specificity while affirming its compatibility with—and vital presence within—European democracy.

Chapter four, “Buried Language: Elsa Triolet’s Bilingualism,” focuses on Triolet’s Occupation novel, *Le premier accroc coûte deux cents francs*, which garnered the first Prix Goncourt awarded to a female writer in 1946. Born into a pluricultural Jewish secular milieu, Triolet became adept in several languages, including Russian, German, and French. Having obtained French citizenship after her marriage to a French military officer, she frequented intellectuals and artists such as Fernand Léger, Marcel Duchamp, Sonia and Robert Delaunay, Man Ray, Francis Picabia, Pablo Picasso, and Vladimir Mayakovsky in the decidedly cosmopolitan circles of Montparnasse cafés during the 1920s. Her diaries convey ambivalence toward her Jewish roots as potential sources of rejection and marginalization, and Triolet published her first three novels of the 1920s in Moscow and in Russian, fearing that she was losing that native tongue while in Paris. Language was vital for her, remaining at the heart of her writing for several decades. Deeply dissatisfied with her experience of translated texts, she ultimately adopted French as the language of international communist struggle and French intellectual Resistance, working along with such key figures as Georges Politzer, Jacques Decour, Danielle Casanova, Jean Paulhan, and her husband Louis Aragon. Elsky’s precisely detailed, well-documented account pairs close readings of Triolet’s narratives with detailed analyses of the novelist’s experience as a Jewish Russian expatriate finding her way to literary success in France. In her Occupation writings, as well as those of the 1950s, Triolet portrays attachment to Jewish heritage as a hindrance to political engagement, while downplaying and sometimes entirely discounting the significance of specifically Jewish suffering: the real problem for Triolet as for Marxist ideology in general was the anti-capitalist, anti-fascist struggle. For her, the cause of international Communism superseded and in effect eclipsed concerns for the plight of Jews, belittled as a “private” or “individual” matter (p. 161).

Chapter five, “Displacing Stereotypes: Irène Némirovsky in the Occupied Zone,” points out that while ambivalent toward her Jewish-Russian origins, Némirovsky maintained friendships with other Russian expatriates and featured conspicuously Jewish characters in her pre-war narratives such as *L’Enfant génial* and the widely renowned *David Golder*. While knowledge and practice of Judaism along with bilingualism often appear as a vital source of artistic creation, the demands of socio-economic status proved to be at odds with the wellsprings of culture and language. Némirovsky’s own conflicted attitudes were further complicated by her highly problematic relations with a mother who shunned her Jewish heritage, and by Némirovsky’s deep affection for the person and language of her French governess. Given the previous thematic importance of immigration, Yiddish, and Hebrew in her writings of the 1920s and 1930s, the virtually total absence of Jews from *Suite française* constitutes a “homogenization” of the novel (p. 191). Némirovsky had apparently reached the conclusion that France was unwilling or unable to accept Jewish specificity. Thus disillusioned, she chose to avoid the themes of Jewish displacement and

alienation in *Suite française*. Elsky adopts an eminently lucid, reasoned perspective, emphasizing Némirovsky's complex, changing, and ultimately undecidable relation to the troubling stereotypes prominent in *David Golder* and elsewhere: rather than issuing any definitive verdict, Elsky emphasizes along with Denise Epstein, Némirovsky's daughter, that "she was before anything a writer" (p. 202).

In her "Epilogue: Memory, Language, and Jewish Francophonie," Elsky echoes Myriam Anissimov's autobiographical essay as "A Yiddish Writer Who Writes in French": as a "hybrid language" expressing Yiddish inflexions and feelings, French can serve as a home that can "encompass Yiddish" amid the trials of displacement and the sense of fathomless loss that has been indelibly inscribed into Yiddish by the Shoah (p. 204).<sup>[1]</sup> Hélène Cixous and Cécile Wajsbrot's epistolary text, *Une autobiographie allemande*, foregrounds French as a "site of multilingualism" (p. 208) in which one language speaks to another outside of national boundaries. The resulting multiplicity of languages blurs boundaries, breaks down barriers separating insiders and outsiders, native and non-native speakers, and engages in a rethinking of what is meant by a Jewish language.

Elsky's study of these *Jewish Émigré Voices in Wartime France* will be read with pleasure by researchers, instructors, and students, for the rich knowledge and insights it offers. One of its most refreshing aspects lies in her insistence on analyzing writers, texts, and contexts in all their complexity, firmly resisting ready-made labels, categorical judgments, and predetermined theories and ideologies. While the facts never "speak for themselves," they do prove stubbornly important and indispensable, particularly when they are so coherently and judiciously incorporated into specific readings and comparative assessments, as is the case here.

#### NOTE

[1] Myriam Anissimov, "A Yiddish Writer Who Writes in French," trans. Thomas Nolden in *Voices of the Diaspora: Jewish Women Writing in Contemporary Europe*, eds. Thomas Nolden and Frances Malino (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2005).

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