

H-France Review Vol. 22 (February 2022), No. 27

Simon Perego, *Pleurons-les: Les Juifs de Paris et la commémoration de la Shoah (1944-1967)*. Preface by Claire Andrieu. Ceyzérieu: Champ Vallon, 2020. Coll. Époques. 387 pp. Index, bibliography, illustrations and glossary. €26.00 (pb). ISBN 979-10-267-0933-6.

Review by Gary D. Mole, Bar-Ilan University.

Reading Simon Perego's richly documented study *Pleurons-les*,^[1] I could not help being constantly reminded of at least two traditional Jewish jokes. One is that all observant Jews have two synagogues: one where they pray and one where they do not. The other is more proverbial: two Jews, three opinions. Given the absolute seriousness of the subject, one might find these thoughts both incongruous and inappropriate. They are not. Perego's book is an unremitting analysis of the incessant religious, secular, political, and ideological conflicts and divisions amongst Parisian Jewry in the aftermath of the Second World War and the seeming impossibility of reaching a consensus on how to commemorate the Shoah.^[2] An important contribution to recent historical research on Jews in France in general in the immediate post-war period,^[3] Perego's study offers more specifically a social, political, cultural, and religious history of Jews in Paris during the two decades following the end of the war.

The expression "Pleurons-les [bénédictions leurs noms, commémorons-les]" is by Sam Lévy, a journalist originally from Salonika, in a 1948 article exhorting the Jews of France not to forget the Shoah (p. 15). Perego employs it in order to explore in depth the myriad associations and organizations founded and operating in Paris from 1944 onwards in order to commemorate the Shoah including, in passing, rival commemorations of the non-Jewish deportation in general. Readers such as myself who have difficulty recalling the meaning of more than eighty acronyms throughout the study and another thirty or so for media sources and archives, may wish to keep for quick reference a finger or a bookmark on the list of abbreviations and their meanings on pages 5 to 8.

Despite revision for publication, Perego's study has a classic French dissertational style and structure, with three finely balanced parts, each with three chapters equal in length based on a thematic organization revolving around the notions of ritual, memories, and identities. Accordingly, Perego's book is at once a social and political history of the place of commemoration in Parisian Jewish life; a cultural and religious history of memory examining the memorial functions that the diverse organizations concerned attempted to give to the commemorations (namely mourning, the verbal staging of the past, and the transmission of memory to a younger generation); and an exploration of the role played by commemorative gatherings in the (re)construction of Parisian Jewish identities and sense of belonging in relation to Jewish religion and practice, postwar France, and the nascent State of Israel.

Part one opens with an extensive analysis of commemoration as a sociopolitical ritual, first studying what Perego calls the structuring elements of Paris's "archipel juif" (p. 31). Despite the

deportation of some 75,000 Jews during the war (about a third of the prewar Jewish population in France), the hardly homogenous Jewish “community” was able to rapidly reconstruct itself by way of an influx of migrants from Central and Eastern Europe (Poland, Russia, Hungary, the Baltic States, Romania), Sephardi Jews (Greece, Serbia, Bulgaria, Egypt, Turkey), and North African Jews (Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia) arriving in the late 1950s and 1960s following decolonization. Together with the “indigenous” French “israélites”—themselves adhering largely to the three trends of consistorial, orthodox, and liberal Judaism—this diversity inevitably led to ideological intraconflictuality, with different associations and groups all proposing very different ways of being Jewish (or Jewish-being) after the war. Prewar political animosities between Zionists, Bundists, and Communists (Perego’s three main antagonistic actors throughout the study) also reappeared in both Yiddish and French-speaking immigrant and autochthonal organizations, crystallizing around the creation of the State of Israel, the Cold War, and the question of Soviet antisemitism. Given these seemingly insurmountable divisions, Perego suggests that the commemorations of the Shoah were intended to create (and indeed could have created) bridges between the numerous interested parties. In turning his attention in part one’s chapter two to the temporal and spatial dimensions of the Jewish commemoration of the Shoah in Paris, Perego somewhat sadly concludes, however, that those bridges were not built at all. On the contrary, disagreements on *when* in the Jewish and non-Jewish calendar and *where* in Paris and its banlieues commemorations should take place, inevitably led to each Jewish tendency, organization and association (Ashkenazi, Sephardi, liberal, traditionalist, orthodox, secular, Zionist, Communist, Bundist, ...), holding its own ceremonies: “la règle demeure [...] la non-coordination, en raison de l’incapacité des organisations juives [...] à s’entendre pour éviter la tenue simultanée de cérémonies” (p. 67). Yet despite this evident lack of coordination, all parties concerned—what Perego terms the “cercles de deuil” and the “cercles commémoratifs” (p. 75)—unanimously recognized the ceremonies as playing a crucial social function in bringing people together to commemorate a shared experience of the war (Jewish combatants, deportees, resistance members, relatives of victims, ...), even though, as Perego demonstrates, the actors involved such as cantors, singers, musicians, and speakers from across the political and ideological spectrum, remained a largely male affair, relegating a marginal place to women (such as the traditional lighting of candles, here in memory of the dead).

Chapter three of part one returns to and develops the notions of unity and solidarity already broached in the two previous chapters, arguing that the commemorative ceremonies were not just occasions for social solidarity,^[4] but above all struggles for power and ascendancy against a highly politicized background, particularly in relation to the Cold War in the 1950s. While Perego shows how “israélites” and postwar immigrants were brought together in a common anticommunist front, he also highlights the fact that Jewish Communists were naturally sympathetic to East Germany and hostile to West German rearmament, while Zionists and Bundists were vocally critical of antisemitism and racism coming from the Soviet Bloc, with Communists in turn turning the accusation of antisemitism and racism against Western imperialism. Although the conflicts arising from the politicization of the commemorations waned a little in the 1960s, they did not entirely disappear. A climate of animosity remained even as various organizations attempted to federate. For example, the CRIF (Conseil représentatif des Juifs de France) wanted to create an umbrella organization for ceremonies of the Shoah, as did the MMJI (Mémorial du martyr juif inconnu) in its desire to centralize commemoration, while the CCI (Consistoire central des israélites) advocated religious neutrality across the board. But again, concludes Perego, nothing really worked: “[les] prétentions fédératrices révélèrent

surtout l'incapacité chronique de l'archipel juif de Paris à rappeler le souvenir de ses disparus de façon unitaire" (p. 134).

Part two changes tack and approaches commemoration as a "vecteur de mémoire" (p. 135), with Perego explicitly shifting his ground from a sociopolitical analysis of rituals to a cultural history of commemorations of the Shoah. There is perhaps initially some redundancy in his arguments as he returns to discussing the spatial-temporal dimensions of commemorating the Shoah (*where* and *when*) but Perego does deepen his interrogation of the questions of public commemoration and individual mourning before discussing in chapter five three important aspects of the commemorations, namely how they were concerned to highlight the specificity of the Jewish genocide compared to other aspects of Nazi criminality and atrocities; how they tended to commemorate the millions of Jewish victims of Nazi persecution while emphasizing Jewish resistance in France and elsewhere (in particular the insurrection of the Warsaw ghetto); and how the different associations and organizations treated the question of Jewish collaboration, notably the accusation that certain officials of the UGIF (Union générale des israélites de France),^[5] had been complicitous with the arrest and subsequent deportation of Jews. Perego concludes part two with a chapter on what he terms the "impératif de la transmission" (p. 204), focusing principally on how the ceremonies attempted to mobilize a younger generation in the commemoration of the Shoah, not just hidden children and child survivors in France during the Occupation, but youth at large. Given that amongst Jews of Eastern European origin there were fewer and fewer Yiddish speakers (with children not understanding their Yiddish-speaking parents, creating intergenerational and intrafamilial problems for the transmission of memory), official discourses across the Jewish political spectrum progressively adopted French as the main language of memorial transmission. Perego also places the ceremonies alongside other contemporary pedagogical initiatives, admirably acknowledging how the public commemoration of the Shoah was designed not just to remember the dead but to teach the younger generation about the Nazi persecution of the Jews and the necessity to preserve the memory of it.

If Perego's first two parts are concerned with exploring how the commemoration of the Shoah between 1944 and 1967 was both a sociopolitical ritual and a crucial vector for the transmission of memory, the final chapters in part three revolve exclusively around the question of how the commemorations were also an important means of asserting an identity, or rather a "triad" of identities in Perego's terms, related to Jewish religious tradition, post-Vichy Fourth and Fifth Republican France, and the State of Israel from 1948 onwards.^[6] Chapter seven explores how religious associations such as the CCI (Consistoire central des israélites) and the ACIP (Association consistoriale israélite de Paris) went about reconquering a public faced with the religious disaffection of many survivors of the Shoah, a general decline in religious observance, mixed marriages, and changes in names. Still, honoring the dead in an appropriate pious manner (for instance, by incorporating the memory of the victims of the Shoah into traditional Jewish liturgy such as *Zakhor*, *Yizkor*, *Kinot*), was rejected not only by most orthodox communities in France, reluctant to see changes in Jewish liturgy, but also by secular Zionists who balked at the idea of any religious reading of the Shoah,^[7] while Communists and Bundists also opposed any religious interpretation of the Shoah. Perego concludes the chapter with a case study of secular Jewish resistance to religious readings of the Shoah by way of a discussion of the activities and positions of the MMJI (Mémorial du martyr juif inconnu) from 1957 onwards and the general secularization of Jewish ritual mourning.^[8]

As regards the French Republic, Perego shows in chapter eight how the organizers of the Jewish ceremonies and commemorations of the Shoah made concerted efforts to invite French non-Jewish public officials and representatives of civil society to participate in them, with the symbolic aim of having Jewish suffering recognized by non-Jews, denouncing Vichy's antisemitism and the perpetrators of Jewish persecution, and reintegrating the Jews into the French State. While political divisions were a constant between Jewish and non-Jewish organizations of former Resistance members and deportees, polls in the late 1960s showed that many non-Jews remained (or chose to remain) ignorant of six million Jews being murdered during the Shoah, so including non-Jews in Jewish ceremonies was important if somewhat ineffectual in raising general French public consciousness. Perego also discusses how Jews responded to the "culte républicain des morts" (p. 287), how Jewish and non-Jewish interaction eventually led to French becoming the dominant language used in official discourses rather than Yiddish (which never sat well with non-Yiddish speaking Jews, and, as Perego argues earlier in the book, Yiddish became an increasingly problematic intergenerational issue for native Yiddish-speakers and their children born in France), even as ceremonies highlighted France's comportment under the Occupation, specifically denouncing Vichy's collaboration and anti-Jewish laws, but also paying tribute to the non-Jews who helped Jews survive. Perego concludes the chapter by asserting that Jewish organizations in Paris used commemorations to mark the reincorporation of Jews into the French nation, and to constantly reassert the success of this reintegration.

So, at a time when through a multitude of discourses and ceremonies Parisian Jews were busy reaffirming their attachment to France, it is no surprise that the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 just three years after the Shoah posed quite a conundrum. It is to this "irruption du référent israélien" (p. 312) that Perego turns in his final chapter. How were Jews to reconcile France-Israel without being accused of dual loyalty? As expected, political lines of fraction again determined reactions. Zionists naturally gave their unconditional support to the State of Israel and its defense faced with any form of political or military aggression; Communists and Bundists on the other hand were far more critical of Israel and were wary of inviting any of its representatives to their ceremonies. More conflicts presented themselves: should there be a memorial to the Shoah in Paris or in Jerusalem (the MMJI or Yad Vashem)? Should there be a different date to commemorate the Shoah than that chosen by Israel? In a word, Perego argues, between 1948 and 1967 Jewish organizations from across the political and ideological spectrum tended to position themselves in commemorations in relation to the State of Israel. The Six-Day War, the imminent existential threat to Israel's survival, and De Gaulle's passing remark during the Press Conference at the Elysée on 27 November 1967 concerning the Jews,[9] would significantly change the way Jews in France saw the France-Israel relationship, but that would be another story altogether and Perego's study stops short of venturing there. In any case, as Perego states in his conclusion, the "archipel juif" in Paris had at least succeeded by 1967, despite all the odds, in resurrecting itself in the aftermath of the genocide.

This all too perfunctory review has only skimmed the surface of this thoroughly researched and fascinating study of Parisian Jewish commemoration of the Shoah in the two decades following the war. Even if it is limited to Paris and its outskirts (regrettably, for this reader: what of Bordeaux, Marseille, Lyon, Alsace?), it will be indispensable reading for scholars of the period coming from a wide range of disciplines: modern French-Jewish history, Jewish studies, social and political science, cultural studies, memory studies, and even literary studies as is my case. Perego is to be highly commended for eloquently and convincingly demonstrating that despite

all the deep trauma arising from the Shoah, conflict and division were also the vibrant signs of the incredibly rich diversity of the nascent “Jewish experience” in postwar France.[10]

NOTES

[1] Based on his 2016 doctoral thesis at Sciences Po Paris, under the supervision of Claire Andrieu who provides a brief preface to this published version.

[2] Perego recognizes the anachronism in the French context of the term Shoah which does not appear in French discourses of the genocide of European Jewry until Claude Lanzmann’s 1985 documentary film.

[3] See, for example, Séan Hand and Steven T. Katz, eds., *Post-Holocaust France and the Jews, 1945-1955* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), Sarah Gensburger, *National Policy, Global Memory: The Commemoration of the “Righteous” from Jerusalem to Paris, 1942-2007* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2016 (2010 for the original French publication), Shannon L. Fogg, *Stealing Home: Looting, Restitution, and Reconstructing Jewish Lives in France, 1942-1947* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), and Philip Nord, *After the Deportation: Memory Battles in Postwar France* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), all reinforcing François Azouvi’s groundbreaking study *Le Mythe du grand silence: Auschwitz, les Français, la mémoire* (Paris: Fayard, 2012), contesting the myth of silence of French Jews after the war.

[4] Perego’s entire study, however, consistently shows that unity and solidarity were rarely achieved in practice during the chosen time period of 1944 to 1967, divisions being far too deep to overcome.

[5] Created by Vichy at the instigation of the German occupying force in 1941.

[6] Perego readily admits that gender, socio-professional categories, geographical origin, and political affiliation were also no doubt important identity markers for Parisian Jews, even if he does not take them into account in his study.

[7] Preferring to see for instance the insurrection of the Warsaw ghetto not in traditional theological terms of Jewish martyrdom in the name of God, a *Kiddush HaShem*, but as sanctification of the martyrdom of the Jewish people, a *Kiddush HaAm*.

[8] For example, the adoption of wearing black, observing a minute of silence, the recourse to the recitation of literary or poetic works during ceremonies of mourning, are all integrally alien to Jewish orthodox tradition.

[9] Charles de Gaulle, Press Conference (27 November, 1967): “Un peuple d’élite, sûr de lui-même et dominateur,” though Perego does not mention it.

[10] And, indeed, his 2016 Ph.D. thesis on which the book is based, received the Prix de thèses francophones en études juives 2017, the Prix Henri Hertz 2018, and the Prix de la Chancellerie des Universités de Paris 2018.

Gary D. Mole
Bar-Ilan University
molega@biu.ac.il

Copyright © 2022 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for

edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172