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Ruth Zylberman, director. *Les enfants du 209 rue Saint-Maur, Paris Xe*. ARTE France and Zadig Productions, 2017. 100 minutes. Distributed by Icarus Films. \$348.00 U.S. (institutional use).

Review by Brad Prager, University of Missouri.

The residential apartment building at 209 rue Saint-Maur in Paris, a large stone structure featuring a paved entryway and intricate moldings, is built around a common courtyard where neighbors can see into one another's homes and their children can play. As in the 1930s, storefronts to the left and right of the main entrance face out onto the street. In 1936, which is when the story told by the documentary *Les enfants du 209 rue Saint-Maur, Paris Xe* begins, this address was home to 300 apartments, inhabited mostly by working-class families, and, according to Ruth Zylberman, the film's director, approximately one-third of those families were Jews. The residents were thrown into turmoil by the war and the occupation, and many of those at whom Zylberman points her camera, mainly survivors for whom the 1930s are childhood memories, were faced with a narrow set of options: Jews could only hide or submit, while non-Jews were pressured to cooperate with the occupation. Members of this community—if it was one—were faced with stark alternatives.

Zylberman, who is the author of *La direction de l'absent*, a 2015 novel about a daughter of Holocaust survivors, makes a valiant effort to recreate the mood pervasive in the late 1930s and early 1940s.[1] She is committed to doing the detective work necessary to bring us to a point at which we can visualize the past. She claims to have chosen 209 rue Saint-Maur arbitrarily, asserting, “Je l'ai choisi au hasard mais j'arpentais depuis longtemps les rues du Nord-Est parisien [...]. C'est en découvrant le recensement de 1936 que je me suis aperçue qu'un tiers des trois cents habitants du 209 étaient juifs.”[2] She adds, “Avec sa cour et ses quatre bâtiments, cet immeuble permettait en outre de multiplier les points de vue et de faire place au présent.”[3] Watching her film, viewers may begin to feel as though the time and place depicted are neither all that long ago nor all that far away and that the past can be made present through awakening the still living witnesses' memories. To activate those memories, Zylberman engages in a variety of exercises involving mapping and illustrating the building's layout—a process of collective recollection that eventually constitutes the fabric of her film.

The film's director entreats nearly all her subjects, mainly elderly witnesses, to do as she does: to map the space as they recall it. To this end, Zylberman supplies them with pens, paper, and sometimes additional craft materials. We do not observe her instructing them to engage in this activity—although she has not cut her own voice and image out of the film entirely, she opts not to depict discussions with her interviewees about the process. We are left to wonder if anyone

resisted her promptings, and whether they were allowed to select their own representational media. Such conversations might have been worth including. Instead, we are introduced to the witnesses while they are in the midst of depicting things. Occasionally Zylberman goes so far as to have her witnesses manipulate three-dimensional models, rarely if ever repeating one of her object-oriented memory exercises. Here too, we might wonder how the film would have taken shape had she asked each of them to map the building under identical conditions, or to contribute to the same schematic model.

Les enfants du 209 rue Saint-Maur opens in Paris at night: from offscreen we hear a maternal voice reading the story of the “Three Little Pigs” to a child. The nineteenth-century fairy tale, which surged in popularity in the 1930s owing to Walt Disney’s animated version of it, takes on larger meanings here. On the one hand, the big bad wolf is Germany, but, on the other hand, the Germans are barely present as the antagonists of this film. Much more threatening, as far as the film’s recollections are concerned, are non-Jewish French residents, some of whom betray the Jews and appear to be unfamiliar with the more compassionate connotations of the word “neighbor.” The winds of history have forced the residents into difficult positions. The camera surveys the windows of the building as though we were positioned voyeuristically across the street. Zylberman’s voice explains that these nineteenth-century Parisian buildings were built to last. She then asks a rhetorical question that makes the story’s contemporary implications clear: in light of what happened, can any of us ever feel truly sheltered?

Early on, Zylberman’s documentary refers us to a 1936 census in which she finds the names of the 300 residents listed. That list includes numerous Italian, Polish, and Romanian Jews. She communicates statistics somewhat hazily, moving quickly to the microlevel of individual family stories, starting with that of the Diamants, who were originally from Poland and who began to set down French roots in 1923. The family’s three youngest children were born on French soil. The surviving Diamant is Odette, who was born in 1930.^[4] After having ascertained this information from other sources, Zylberman shows herself placing a post-it note—soon to be one of many—on an elaborately drawn schematic of the building. She then transitions to a conversation with Odette, who now lives in Tel Aviv. Odette is one of the large array of witnesses to come, and although each one leaves a distinct impression, either because their encounters with the past are so revelatory or because we witness them struggling to hold their emotions at bay, we do not get to know any one of them as well as we might hope to.

The methodological principle Zylberman follows is one in which she seeks a mean between a microscopic focus on an individual or small group of survivors and a reliance on the weightiness of wider historical events. In happening upon 209 rue Saint-Maur, Zylberman perhaps felt she found an ideal object: it neither bound her to the singular experience of a person or a small group, nor was she required to pull her focus back so far as to make singular experiences meaningless (the film, as is perhaps for the best, contains no newsreel footage explaining, for example, the terms of the French surrender or the various governing institutions of the Vichy regime). The highly detailed book that Zylberman published after her film’s release and which contains the rue Saint-Maur residents’ stories along with expanded discussions of how the director obtained them bears the subtitle *‘autobiographie d’un immeuble’*, which signals that she is trying to come to terms with history in an idiosyncratic way. In explicating her choices, she has cited the work of the historian Claire Zalc, who specializes in microhistory.^[5] Zalc, together with Tal Bruttman, has taken note of changing trends within Holocaust historiography, pointing out that “studies focusing on a single camp or ghetto, or a particular roundup, city, convoy, family, or battalion

have contributed to a deep renewal of Holocaust studies.”[6] However, they add that “the implications and historiographical relevance of this microhistorical shift have not been critically examined.”[7] Their work raises questions that have implications for the documentary: how can a filmmaker balance between micro- and macrolevels? One may conclude that Zylberman, in carefully attending to her dialectically structured approach, occasionally backs away too far from her subjects. At times, the stories told by individuals are, especially in contrast with the level of detail provided in the subsequently published and impressively researched book on the subject, cut unexpectedly short.

For her part, Odette sketches the architecture of 209 rue Saint-Maur from memory. While examining a list of residents’ names, she recalls, perhaps for the first time in many decades, the location of the ground floor *épicerie*, and she then begins to discuss a photograph from a family vacation. Eventually we move on, from Tel Aviv to Nevers, 250 kilometers south of Paris, for the story of another witness. The film’s transitions from one interviewee to the next, sometimes in the middle of conversations that have long since started, along with the director’s reluctance to clearly identify each witness by name, at times undercuts the significance of individual interviews, each of which is an important part of the testimonial archive. Although the witnesses’ stories surely benefit from being interwoven, some viewers may find the lack of onscreen labels an obstacle. The familial relationships between interviewees are occasionally obscured, and I was, at times, uncertain whether testimony was being provided by a surviving victim or the child of a collaborator. The information is all surely there in the film, and it is most certainly there in Zylberman’s remarkably researched book, but many specifics will remain opaque to viewers who watch the documentary only once.

Whether or not one is clued into every detail, many of the film’s testimonies are extraordinarily moving. Albert Baum, describing how his parents were textile workers, mentions a sewing machine that belonged to his mother and recounts obtaining one just like it sometime later, after the war, because it reminded him of her. Sewing machines take on a special significance in view of the yellow stars Jews were forced to wear. Attaching stars to one’s clothing, we are later told, had to be done seamlessly such that one would be unable to fit a pencil between any two of the star’s stitches. That type of detail drives home some of the highly gendered consequences of the persecution: adding to Jewish mothers’ difficulties was the expectation that they would become impeccable seamstresses.

Of perhaps greatest interest is the director’s interview with Jeanine Dinanceau, now living in Nantes. When reconstructing the past with her, Zylberman has her manipulate small doll-house-style furniture as they, together, read through a list of names in a form we have not seen before: it is handwritten, unlike a digital list that we saw earlier in the film, which was displayed on a smartphone. Zylberman’s choices are calculated: she is showing us the multitude of different types of documents from which one might work, drawing attention to how such documents, and thus the memories they awaken, are mediated. Dinanceau then informs us that her working-class family was always getting into fights over politics, providing us with an example of the damage the occupation did to non-Jews. Her reflections remind us that World War I was hardly ancient history in the 1930s, and that, for many Europeans, new conflicts were extensions of older ones. Her family, she says, brawled over Philippe Pétain and Charles de Gaulle. She eventually becomes reluctant to draw her story to its close, and when she reaches the part about how her father was given a hard time because of his leftist politics and about how her brother eventually collaborated

with the Germans, she goes silent and protests that Zylberman is merely stirring up bad memories.

Some of the documentary's most striking images include shots of the building's façade, and one particularly noteworthy sequence involves the projection of filmed images onto the structure's walls and windows at night, as though the entire building were transformed into a screen at a drive-in movie theater. Here too, context might have helped: the filmed excerpts, including images of families in their homes, sewing machines, and soldiers on the move, are from *Nous continuons!..* (1948), a short film about the Commission Centrale de l'Enfance, which was produced after the liberation and devoted to Jewish children who had survived Nazism and the Vichy regime. We could surely stand to know the director's intention in including this film, the name of which appears only in Zylberman's end credits. The effect of the black and white past overtaking and haunting the residences at night is stunning. It is likely that these were authentic projections rather than superimpositions produced in postproduction, but, regardless of whether the effect is digital or practical, it echoes work by the multimedia artist Shimon Attie.[8] Attie's visual installations, shown at various locations in Europe in the 1990s, involved projecting historical photos of former Jewish residents onto the façades of homes and businesses. In both cases, black and white images evoke ghostly remnants. Through their soundless deployment as a film-within-a-film (the original film contained narration, replaced here by a haunting score and Zylberman's own voice), we are reminded that motion pictures are the bearers of visual and sonic echoes.

Zylberman eventually turns her attention to the major roundups, focusing on July 16th and 17th 1942--the Vél d'Hiv round up in which approximately 13,000 Jewish men, women, and children were taken from their homes, a raid that specifically targeted foreign-born Jews. The accounts of Zylberman's contemporary witnesses are particularly excruciating. It is a sad story of contingency, one that hinged on who was closest to whom at which moments. This is the point at which we return to the story Jeanine Dinanceau could not tell earlier on: during this time her father and brother fought over the brother's complicity, and, according to another neighbor, who witnessed the confrontation, it became violent. We understand why these are painful memories, and when Zylberman transitions back to Jeanine, she is struggling with tears.

For many anglophone viewers, the story of Henry Osman, whose parents hid him with neighbors in 1942, saving him but also leaving him orphaned, will be particularly resonant. Osman became an American, and Zylberman finds him in New York, "de l'autre côté de l'atlantique." He has forgotten all but the least bit of French, initially remarking that he doesn't even want to see any of Zylberman's scrupulously collected documents. In her book, Zylberman quotes Henry (in translation) as saying: "J'ai laissé tout ça loin derrière moi. Je m'efforce de ne pas me souvenir car si j'oublie je suis heureux. Si je me souviens, la colère montre en moi. Quand vous êtes en colère, vous êtes le seul à souffrir, donc je suis heureux quand je ne suis pas en colère, quand je ne me souviens pas." [9] Why Osman agreed to meet with the director at all is presented as a bit of a mystery, but it suggests that he was more curious than he was willing to admit. Zylberman entices him with details, gradually pushing the unwanted past upon him. The surfeit of detail eventually breaks Henry down and he takes an interest.

At the film's conclusion, Zylberman brings many of the survivors together in a sort of reunion, and the camera catches snippets of their conversations.[10] Watching and listening to these stories, we might reflect on the choices the residents made, many of which resonate strongly

today, when we consider our own implication in unjust frameworks and what kind of neighbors we aspire to be. Whenever big bad wolves blow and whatever real and metaphorical winds destroy lives—the worse the winds are, the more entangled neighbors become with one another, aware that those closest can either provide help or exacerbate harm. Whether the non-Jewish residents of 209 rue Saint-Maur were going to act like heroic neighbors, complicit parts of an occupation, or those who choose to look away, each of them, as is revealed by the film, knew something, saw something, or did something. No neighbor was only a bystander, and work such as Zylberman’s contributes in some measure to putting that obsolete term to rest.

NOTES

[1] See Ruth Zylberman, *La direction de l’absent* (Paris: Christian Bourgois éditeur, 2015). See also the English translation, *The Department of Missing Persons: A Novel*, trans. Grace McQuillan (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2017).

[2] See Christine Guillemeau, “Interview de Ruth Zylberman—Les enfants du 209 rue Saint-Maur,” ARTE Magazine, June 11, 2018. <https://vod.mediatheque-numerique.com/article/interview-de-ruth-zylberman-les-enfants-du-209-rue-saint-maur>.

[3] Guillemeau, “Interview de Ruth Zylberman.”

[4] For more details about Odette see Zylberman’s book, *209 Rue Saint-Maur, Paris Xe: autobiographie d’un immeuble* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil/ARTE Éditions, 2020), p. 45 and pp. 49-54.

[5] See the reference to Zalc in Zylberman, *209 Rue Saint-Maur*, p. 30.

[6] Claire Zalc and Tal Bruttman, “Introduction: Toward a Microhistory of the Holocaust,” in Claire Zalc and Tal Bruttman, eds., *Microhistories of the Holocaust* (New York: Berghahn, 2016), p. 2.

[7] Zalc and Bruttman, “Introduction,” p. 2.

[8] Attie’s work is discussed by James Young in *At Memory’s Edge: After-images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 62-89.

[9] Zylberman, *209 Rue Saint-Maur*, p. 245.

[10] For a description of this event, see Zylberman, *209 Rue Saint-Maur*, 405-417.

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