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Thomas Kvist Christiansen, *Nous sommes ici pour mourir. L'itinéraire d'Arlette Lévy-Andersen, rescapée d'Auschwitz*. Translated and edited by Fabrice Boyer. Clermont-Ferrand: Presses universitaires Blaise-Pascal, 2021. 248 pp. Photographs, notes, annexes, and bibliography. €35.00. (pb). ISBN 978-2845169999. [Original Edition: Thomas Kvist Christiansen, *Vi er her for at dø*. Fredericia: Kvist Kommunikation og Billunds Boghandel, 2018.]

Review by Ashley Valanzola, Middle Tennessee State University.

Forty-five years went by before Arlette Lévy-Andersen chose to publicly divulge the horrors she endured during the Second World War. Forty-five years during which she lived “une vie normale et heureuse,” despite the traumas she personally experienced (p. 166). When she broke her silence, Lévy-Andersen shared the tumultuous journey of a young Jewish woman who prevailed over appalling wartime cruelty to serve as a witness to the crimes of the Third Reich.

Filmmaker and author Thomas Kvist Christiansen captures this remarkable story of perseverance in his visually stunning account of Arlette Lévy-Andersen's life. Text and photography combine to tell Lévy-Andersen's story—first documenting how the life of a young university-aged woman was upended by racial persecution, and then resuming decades later when Lévy-Andersen began speaking publicly about her wartime experiences. Throughout his retelling of Lévy-Andersen's life, Christiansen weaves in the larger French and international context of the war, with a focus on the mass murder of European Jews.

The book tells a story, but it also fulfills one of Lévy-Andersen's lifelong missions: to record her account of survival as a tool in the fight against Holocaust denial. To help in this effort, Christiansen presents Lévy-Andersen's story with the help of historians, psychologist Anne Agerbo, his fellow filmmakers, and an array of interviewees who have been personally touched by Lévy-Andersen's story. He draws from a variety of compelling sources, including a cache of Lévy-Andersen's wartime letters to her parents, only discovered in 1987. Beautifully translated from Danish, this book is a welcome addition to the growing number of memoirs and biographies of Holocaust survivors from France.

The first and largest section of the book focuses on Lévy-Andersen's life during the war and the immediate postwar period. We pick up Lévy-Andersen's story as she was living with her secular Jewish family in the Marais. Born in 1924, Lévy-Andersen was preparing for her baccalaureate exam when the war began encroaching upon her life. Forced to abandon her dream of studying at the Sorbonne, Lévy-Andersen and her family took refuge in Clermont-Ferrand where she began her studies in English.

One of the book's many strengths includes a brilliant historical snapshot of university life in Clermont-Ferrand during the war. Home to a fairly young university, Clermont-Ferrand welcomed students and faculty from the long-established University of Strasbourg. Having fled the German invasion, the refugees from Strasbourg helped spark early resistance among the faculty and students in Clermont-Ferrand. As a center of resistance activity, the Germans targeted the university, particularly as they increased arrests of Jews and resisters in November 1942. The uptick in arrests coincided with larger German military defeats. As the Germans cracked down on refugees in Clermont-Ferrand, Lévy-Andersen and her family felt "un sentiment d'insécurité" (p. 49). For example, regular German identification checks forced them to shelter in the nearby woods. The increasing ferocity with which the German occupiers and their French collaborators targeted Jews in the formerly unoccupied zone led to the tragic circumstances of Lévy-Andersen's arrest.

In what turns out to be one of the most painful turning points of Lévy-Andersen's young life, Christiansen captures the acute sense of betrayal when one of Clermont-Ferrand's leading resisters, who also happened to be a university student, fell into German hands. Georges Matthieu turned on his fellow students and resisters to help the Germans conduct a major raid on the university, resulting in the arrest of over six hundred students—including Lévy-Andersen. During this violent university roundup, the Germans targeted foreigners, Jews, men and women from Alsace-Lorraine between 18 to 30 years old, and resisters. Odile Colette Morilon, who was present in Clermont-Ferrand on the day of the raid, offered her perspective: "Parce que Mathieu était impliqué dans la Résistance, il avait été arrêté par l'occupant et il avait fait le choix de server les Allemands, pour sauver sa tête. Il s'agissait naturellement d'un choix difficile, mais, malheureusement, il avait opté pour la trahison et, en la matière, il était passé maître : il a eu en effet de très nombreuses morts sur la conscience. Il pouvait déclarer : 'Tes papiers d'identité sont falsifiés. Je le sais bien car je les ai fabriqués'" (p. 61). By complying with the Germans, Matthieu ensured the success of the arrests of his former friends and fellow students as well as the faculty of his own university.

After falling victim to Matthieu's collaboration, Lévy-Andersen's circumstances went from bad to worse. First, the Germans held her prisoner at the barracks of the 92<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Regiment, followed by her transfer to the infamous Drancy internment camp. To discuss Lévy-Andersen's time in these two camps, Christiansen incorporates her personal letters, which reveal a young woman whose main priority was to reassure her parents that "le moral reste excellent" (p. 68). She insisted to them that while imprisoned within the barracks of the 92<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Regiment, her days were interspersed with work, lectures, conversation, walks, and games. She might have succeeded in quelling their fears until her letters abruptly stopped mid-January 1944. Lévy-Andersen was unable to write from her next destination: Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Upon her arrival at this infamous camp in Poland, Lévy-Andersen was "fortunate" enough to be spared being sent directly to the gas chambers. Instead, she entered the camp as a forced laborer. As he recounts the in-processing of Lévy-Andersen and other women, Christiansen astutely captures the abject humiliation these women faced. Women became indistinct as camp functionaries ruthlessly shaved all hair from their bodies in an austere building known as the sauna. Stripped naked, tattooed, dispossessed of all their belongings, the shock was all-encompassing. In reflecting back on these moments, Lévy-Andersen failed to recall exactly what happened to her, "Arlette [Lévy-Andersen] ne se rappelle plus ce qui s'est passé pendant les heures passées dans le sauna, à l'exception de quelques détails: ce sont comme des flashes qui

émergent de la mémoire” (p. 98). Later in the book, Lévy-Andersen is plagued with a similar memory lapse when she could not remember anything concrete after the Germans transferred her to Ravensbrück, a concentration camp for women. These moments Lévy-Andersen failed to recall represent the ability of the perpetrators to push the human mind to the point where forgetting became the only way to cope. These silences are places within the book where Lévy-Andersen’s suffering is keenly felt.

As Christiansen recounts Lévy-Andersen’s time in Auschwitz-Birkenau, he elaborates upon everyday life within the camp, including the gruesome details of mass murder and the exact number of individuals killed. In this sense, Christiansen contributes to Lévy-Andersen’s mission to combat Holocaust denial. His focus on exact figures in partnership with the testimony of one survivor form irrefutable evidence of the crimes committed by certain Germans and their collaborators during the Holocaust.

The photographs that accompany this section on Auschwitz-Birkenau are, for the most part, quite moving. Examples include an image of “beurre et pain,” which looks more like a brick made of sawdust, and a photograph of the four crematoria, ominously lit. Despite these powerful images, one photo stands out as shockingly inappropriate. Christiansen includes a photo of a woman’s corpse in the snow. Except for what looks to be a shoulder covering of some sort, the woman is entirely nude, her body exposed not only to the snow, but to the viewer. She lays on her back with her rear leg bent slightly and her face angled towards the camera. Next to photos that primarily focus on landscapes and objects (apart from a few fully clad male inmates), it is unclear what this photo is supposed to represent. What perhaps could have been meant as an “artistic” inclusion, comes across as a distasteful sexualization of mass murder. Without context, this image’s presence within the book seems to disrespect the body of this murdered woman once more.

Besides this photograph, Christiansen does an effective job portraying Lévy-Andersen’s deportation experiences. Upon Liberation, he covers her return to France where she is--against all odds--reunited with her parents in one of the book’s most moving chapters. What is striking about this account is precisely how rare it was. Few Jewish deportees returned (only 2,500 people out of over 76,000), and even fewer found their immediate families intact. When Lévy-Andersen arrived at a welcome center in Paris, she immediately set about trying to reach her parents, whom she quickly discovered had already returned. Because her parents’ phone line was inoperable, she contacted a friend in her family’s apartment building. Hearing from Lévy-Andersen, her friend wasted no time yelling into the courtyard: “Arlette est de retour!” (p. 161). Without delay, her parents came for her, discovering with horrified shock that she weighed just 30 kg (66 lbs). Together with friends and family, her parents set about finding food for her, despite widespread shortages. Lévy-Andersen’s return was remarkable, but her family was not spared from loss; three of Lévy-Andersen’s cousins--Paulette, Michèle, et Geneviève--never returned.

After this emotional family reunion, Christiansen shifts the narrative to focus on Lévy-Andersen’s postwar life, including how she finished her university studies, met her Danish husband, and moved to Denmark. Settling into Danish society, she started a family and began her teaching career. From there, the narrative jumps to 1990, when Lévy-Andersen broke forty-five years of silence to begin publicly speaking about her wartime experiences. Not unlike many other survivors in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the continued prevalence of Holocaust denial motivated survivors to act. Wanting to refute denialist claims, survivors shared their stories as

often as possible. Paired with the rise of politicians like Jean-Marie Le Pen, who sought to trivialize the Holocaust, Lévy-Andersen decided it was her turn to speak out.

Extensively discussing Lévy-Andersen's postwar engagement, Christiansen sets his book apart from other accounts of survivors because of the focus he places on her life after Liberation. Christiansen makes a conscious and effective choice to discuss her various contributions to Holocaust memory, first in Denmark, and also in France. What started as an opportunity to speak at her children's school morphed into her very *raison d'être*. Lévy-Andersen spoke at a wide variety of schools, sat for interviews, and participated in Christiansen's documentary, which in fact led to the realization of this book. She surmounted the nightmares that returned during this period to captivate audiences with her firsthand account of life during the Holocaust.

During this period of memory activism, Lévy-Andersen had the opportunity to reconnect with one individual to whom she literally owed her life while imprisoned at Auschwitz-Birkenau: Jacques Stroumsa. Watching a television program on the Holocaust, Lévy-Andersen heard Stroumsa's account of his time at Auschwitz-Birkenau. At one point, Stroumsa recalled how through a friendship with a young German chief engineer, he arranged for several students from the University of Clermont-Ferrand to leave their harsh outdoor work assignment and assume a position within the Weichsel-Union-Metallwerke armament factory. Shocked, Lévy-Andersen recognized her own story coming out of the mouth of this stranger. Not long after watching the television program, Lévy-Andersen contacted Stroumsa and arranged to host him in Denmark.

In the final chapters of the book, Christiansen explores the impact of Lévy-Andersen's speaking engagements alongside a behind-the-scenes discussion of his documentary. Twenty years after hearing her speak, Signe Pedersen remarked how Lévy-Andersen delivered "une conférence que je n'oublierai jamais" (p. 189). After viewing the documentary, a student just beginning her studies in Clermont-Ferrand emphasized how Lévy-Andersen's story personally resonated with her. "Et c'est la première fois qu'il m'est donné de voir une actrice du drame d'Auschwitz, en butte aux nazis et aux autres difficultés de la guerre. Cela n'a l'air de rien, mais le simple fait de savoir qu'elle se promenait ici dans ces espaces universitaires qui sont les nôtres aujourd'hui et qu'elle vivait à Clermont-Ferrand, rend ce témoignage d'autant plus réel" (pp. 212-213). Throughout these later chapters, Christiansen is keen to note how his team's work furthered Lévy-Andersen's legacy by expanding the audiences that could hear her story.

With this in mind, the book ends by noting the film's premiere and its initial success. The ending falls a bit flat, especially compared to the power of Lévy-Andersen's story and her work to publicly share what she endured. After the conclusion of the formal narrative, Christiansen includes an interview with Lévy-Andersen and a short write-up by psychologist Anne Agerbo as appendices.

Overall, Christiansen offers a visually captivating way to share the story of Arlette Lévy-Andersen. While not unprecedented (see David Teboul's *Simone Veil, L'aube à Birkenau* [1]), Christiansen pushes the genre of survivor testimonies to not only include powerful visual imagery, but also to focus on the story of Lévy-Andersen after Liberation. Lévy-Andersen's persistence in sharing her story with as many people as possible, for as long as she was physically able, serves as a powerful message in itself—one in which Christiansen's book helps pass to future generations.

## NOTE

[1] David Teboul, ed., *Simone Veil, L'aube à Birkenau* (Paris: Les Arènes, 2020).

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