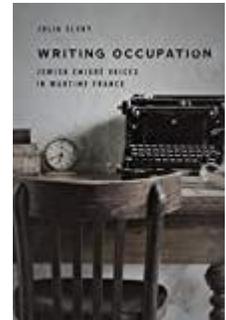




Julia Elsky. *Writing Occupation: Jewish Émigré Voices in Wartime France* (Stanford Studies in Jewish History and Culture). Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020. xi + 273 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-5036-1367-6.



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Decades of scholarly work on the Second World War in France have provided insight into topics such as resistance and collaboration, Jewish experiences, daily life, and public opinion. Since the 1980s, there has been an increased focus on Vichy's complicity in the Holocaust, leading some to argue that people have been obsessed with the memory of the Nazi occupation.[1] Julia Elsky's *Writing Occupation* demonstrates that despite the number of scholarly works dedicated to the "Dark Years" and the Shoah, there is still more to learn and explore. Elsky's work focuses on five Jewish émigré writers from eastern Europe who lived in France during the interwar and war years. Each chapter presents a kind of case study that engages with common arguments and speaks to the wider historical and literary approaches to the time period. Based on the close reading of multiple versions of the authors' writings, Elsky places language, multilingualism, and Jewish identity at the center of her study of individual experiences under Vichy's exclusionary regime. The result is a study that is both wide-ranging and focused and which

will appeal to literary scholars and historians alike.

The five authors (Benjamin Fondane, Jean Malaquais, Romain Gary, Elsa Triolet, and Irène Némirovsky) all immigrated to France well before the war's outbreak, published in French, and spoke multiple languages. As Elsky explains, "The authors discussed in this book wrote about being foreign Jews, but they did so in French and in ways that contest the boundaries between foreignness and belonging as expressed in their new approach to language" (p. 15). As a result, she argues, the study "challenges the binaries of center and periphery, of native and nonnative, of insider and outsider, of Jewish and non-Jewish language." The authors had differing relationships with Judaism, came from different countries and backgrounds, and employed various approaches to language to express their complex identities. However, she sees them as all part of a European and Jewish Francophonie that was a means to resist Vichy's discourse that rejected them as foreigners and Jews. Language, then, becomes the way in

which they explored and sometimes reasserted their place in France as Jews, émigrés, and writers.

In the first chapter, Elsky focuses on the theme of exile in Benjamin Fondane's work. Fondane emigrated to Paris in 1923 from Romania when he was in his mid-twenties. He had already written in Romanian, French, German, and Yiddish before moving to France, but he published exclusively in French after settling in Paris. Pushed by antisemitism and pulled by the French literary scene, Fondane sought an intellectual circle among avant-garde émigré writers in Montparnasse. He married a Frenchwoman and applied for French citizenship, but much of his writing focused on multilingualism as a symbol of exile and displacement. During the war, Fondane revised poems he had written during the interwar period, and Elsky demonstrates how these variations reflected a change in his thinking about language and identity: "he now treated French as a language of noncommunity, and Jewishness as a condition of exclusion" (p. 41). This chapter sets the tone for the rest of the book with Elsky's close reading of Fondane's poems while firmly embedding the work within the historical and literary context. Fondane was arrested, deported, and murdered in Auschwitz in October 1944.

The chapter devoted to Jean Malaquais examines the Polish writer's use of accents in *Planète sans visa* as a means of rejecting Jewish stereotypes embraced by the Far Right. Set in Marseille and written between 1942 and 1947, *Planète sans visa* reflects some of Malaquais's own experiences as an immigrant to many countries in the early twentieth century. It also captures the wartime experience of refugees seeking to flee Nazi-occupied Europe. Whereas Fondane portrayed French as a language of exclusion during the war, Malaquais "uses speech ... to show how accents reveal the individual experience of exile and displacement, and the transformation of refugees into one transnational group of people" (p. 75). The mul-

ti-ple languages used in Marseille mark nearly everyone as "different" and these differences help make everyone the same. Elsky also examines Malaquais's use of Jewish accents and demonstrates how they were imbued with positive attributes rather than the negative connotations employed by antisemitic writers.

Elsky focuses on Romain Gary's use of multilingual heteroglossia—the coexistence of multiple discourses within a single language—to articulate ideas about universalism and resistance during the occupation. For Gary, French was the language of democracy that could encompass other languages and national identities and would help build the Europe of the future. Born in Vilnius, Gary spoke Russian, Polish, and French before settling in France. He joined the Resistance and wrote *Education européenne* (1944) during the war, which would become one of the most famous pieces of Resistance literature. Elsky focuses on the triangular relationship between Poland, France, and England during the war to contextualize Gary's writing. His use of the three languages in his novel, she argues, "shows the Resistance to be a transnational phenomenon that celebrates European democracy on the whole" (p. 114). Yiddish and Hebrew are also incorporated in Gary's text, a symbol of discreet Jewish inclusion in the Resistance and European democracy.

Elsa Triolet, also a member of the Resistance during the war, had a different literary approach. In chapter 4, Elsky focuses on Triolet's use of imagery and what the images reveal about her changing relationship to French Jewish identity during the war. Triolet uses the images of a corset, a painting, and buried notebooks in her writings in the 1930s and 1940s as a way to talk about bilingualism, politics, and Jews in the Resistance. In this chapter, Elsky points out the ways in which Triolet's writings and approaches to language differed from Fondane's, Malaquais's, and Gary's. The other writers employed Yiddish and/or Hebrew and focused on universalism; Triolet uses

only Russian and French and argues against Jewish particularism. For Triolet, French becomes the way that Jews may be included in the Resistance. While French felt uncomfortable to Triolet during the interwar period (a plaster corset), the use of French in the Resistance became the language of self-expression and literal liberation from the Nazis.

The final author, Irène Némirovsky, serves as a counterpoint to the other writers since Némirovsky completely removed Jews and Jewish languages from her wartime writings. As in the other chapters, tracing change over time is critical in the examination of language in Némirovsky's works. Elsky challenges earlier interpretations that accuse the Russian immigrant of Jewish self-hatred. Instead, by focusing on language usage, Elsky offers an alternative view of Némirovsky's use of stereotypes about eastern European Jews. By removing these voices altogether in *Suite Française* (published posthumously in 2004), Elsky argues, Némirovsky replicates the exclusion of Jews in France during the war. Presenting herself as a purely French writer, Némirovsky attempted to claim her place in a country that actively sought to exclude her (and did through her arrest and deportation). Perhaps the erasure of Jews and Jewish language in her writing was an attempt at self-preservation, a reflection of her own status during the war, or an indication of the displacement—physical and emotional—created by the Nazi occupation.

In her epilogue, Elsky emphasizes the ways in which these writers support the idea that French was a Jewish language that each of these authors used to express a sense of belonging or exclusion. She clearly demonstrates that each writer also had a relationship with French that changed over time and reflected the political climate. Based on archival research, close readings of multiple texts and revisions, and a deep knowledge of the relevant literature, Julia Elsky explores what it meant to be a French writer and a Jewish writer for east-

ern European émigrés writing in French before, during, and after the Second World War. Rather than being silenced under the Vichy regime and the Nazi occupation, these writers used the French language to grapple with their complex identities, navigate their senses of belonging, and challenge exclusionary currents and measures.

Julia Elsky has provided a model of Jewish studies scholarship in *Writing Occupation*. Working at the intersection of history, literary studies, and Holocaust studies, the book articulates innovative questions about language, identity, and the Second World War in France. Clearly written with thorough analysis that engages with key themes, the book underlines the complexities of multilingualism in writing and in lives. It also raises potential future avenues of exploration including analysis of gendered voices and further examinations of the ways in which language plays a role in identity.

Note

[1]. See, for example, Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

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