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Kathleen O'Rourke

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Reclaiming Identity: Finding One's Place as a French Jew in the Post World War II Period

Kathleen O'Rourke

Fifty years after the end of WWII, French President Jacques Chirac said, "There are moments in the life of a nation that hurt the memory and the idea one has of his country."¹ President Chirac made this statement at the 1995 commemoration of the July 1942 Velodrome d'Hiver roundup of Jews in Paris, one of the many instances of the violent mistreatment of Jews under France's Vichy Regime during the Holocaust. On June 22, 1940, when France surrendered to Nazi Germany, the Third Republic was dissolved and the collaborationist Vichy Regime was set up by Marshal Henri Petain. From the outset, Vichy pursued anti-Semitic policies, such as the October 1940 "Statute on Jews" which forced racial segregation, making Jews a lower class. There was a noted difference in Vichy's attitude toward French Jews and Jewish refugees in France. During the 1930's thousands of Jews from Eastern Europe fled to France, seeing it as a safe harbor due to its professed republican ideals. When Vichy instigated policies against the Jews, they targeted refugee Jews before French Jews.

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In the immediate post war period, the French people- both non-Jews and Jews who had either remained in France or returned after the war- were left to deal with the consequences of Vichy. French Jews were placed in a complicated situation; the seemingly competing ideas of nationality and religion left postwar Jews trying to re-discover their place in the nation. As for the rest of the French people, rather than confronting the actions of the recent past, they denied and revised history. The French identity as a country of freedom and liberty directly conflicted with the actions of Vichy France during the Holocaust; as a result the French chose to ignore the past, leaving the French Jews to grapple with the relationship of their religion and nationality in the wake of WWII.

The complexities surrounding the French relationship with the Jews were not unique to the post-World War II period. Historically, the French have been engaged in a battle to maintain “purity” in their identity. Purity, meaning, that one had to give up all other identities (religious, political, ethnic, social, etc.) in order to completely embrace the French identity. That is why the difference between French Jews and refugee Jews was so important. The French were willing to accept outsiders as their own if they completely assimilated. It is this secular, singular understanding of citizenship that unifies all French people. This collective French identity has been a continuous theme throughout French history, and can be seen clearly during, and after, World War II. Their need for preservation of identity was what allowed the French to ignore their wartime faults, and allow the creation of a postwar myth that portrayed the French nation as

victims, much to the expense of the Jews throughout the nation.

There are many aspects of the problem of French national memory and the memory of French Jews following World War II. The relationship between Vichy France and the Jews during the war may be viewed as grounded in the long held anti-Semitic views of French citizens who assisted the Vichy regime with their anti-Semitic policies. Robert Paxton and Michael Marrus, in *Vichy and the Jews*, analyze the openly anti-Semitic views of the French who were a part of the Vichy regime, and the support of many ordinary French citizens.² Paxton and Marrus note that while France was the first European nation to grant the Jews full civil rights at the end of the Eighteenth century, French people were also the most ardent supporters of secular anti-Semitism at the end of the Nineteenth century. These complexities are part of the reason that Vichy policy towards the Jews was successful; the mindset of anti-Semitism did not arrive with the Germans, rather, it was already common in France. The actions of the Vichy regime could not have been carried through without some level of consent from the people. As the authors state, "No occupying power, however, can administer territory by force alone...successful occupations depend heavily upon accomplices."³ The authors believe it was French anti-Semites who initiated and allowed the cruel Vichy policies to be implemented, with no help from the

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Germans until they, the Germans, decided to implement their Final Solution in France in 1942.

While Paxton and Marrus focus on the events that occurred under Vichy rule, other scholars have sought to understand the complexities that the regime left for the psyche of the French nation, complexities that continued to plague the nation long after the war ended. In his book, *The Vichy Syndrome*, leading scholar Henry Rousso explains that the events under Vichy continued to live on until the French were able to come to terms with their past.⁴ Rousso asserts that after the war, acknowledging the actions of the Vichy government was more difficult for the French people than coming to terms with the Occupation itself. This problem creates a conflict between the areas of memory and history. Rousso confronts this challenge by looking at the stages of the postwar myth as they unfolded chronologically, and how each was addressed by the nation. He called the first stage from 1945-1953 the Unfinished Mourning. During this time, the French people sought revenge in the case of collaborators, while ignoring Vichy's anti-Semitism. There was also a distinct tension between glorifying the Resistance and forgetting the collaborators. To move away from the tension, the French instead focused on the crimes of other nations during the war, most especially Germany. Rousso's explanation of this first stage is essential to this paper because it addresses the feelings and actions of the French government and French non-Jews. To understand how the French Jews felt in postwar France, it is essential to understand the

⁴ Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

actions of the rest of the country, something Rousso explains in his book.

Another area of important scholarship is the study of politics and memory. History is always told by the victor, which presents France with a peculiar situation; choosing whether to be seen as a country of resistance or accepting responsibility for Vichy. Revealing how the French have attempted to understand and confront their role in the Holocaust is a main focus of Caroline Wiedmer's book, *The Claims of Memory: Representations of the Holocaust in Contemporary Germany and France*.⁵ Wiedmer outlines the evolution of the battle of memory through an examination of film, memorials, museums, and commemorations. Sometimes what is not said or done can be more telling of the atmosphere of a country than what was done, as is evidenced by France's lack of formal recognition of their role in the cruel treatment of the Jews during WWII, until Chirac's 1995 speech noted above. France's physical dedications and remembrances tell the most about how the country was torn between trying to forget the atrocities of the Holocaust, while simultaneously needing to remember them, which has unfortunately come across as ambivalence. The perceived ambivalence of the earlier post-war period was atoned for with the later memorials at the Vel d'Hiv and Drancy. Wiedmer's writing shows that how others understood France's dealing with the remnants of the war impacted France itself in the shaping of memory. Overall, the book is a testament

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to the complexities of the great debate around the construction of memory.

The place of the French Jews, and the relationship between their French identity and Jewish identity, is something that is not thoroughly examined in any particular book. While the above historians all contribute to the conversation on postwar Jewish identity, none addresses the problem in its full complexity. This paper attempts to focus on the problems and attitudes of the French Jews in postwar France, while acknowledging the importance their historical relationship plays in their understanding of what occurred under Vichy and after.

The historical place of the Jews in France begins in the Eighteenth century. Europe's Enlightenment thinkers raised questions of oppression, discrimination, and universal human rights. The Jews were a frequent topic of discussion in many philosophical circles. The so-called "Jewish question" raised the issue of the Jewish people's place in French society. The general attitude in French politics and intellectual circles seemed to be, "Even if it was impossible to contemplate ending discrimination toward the Jews altogether...one nonetheless detects a desire for equal treatment."⁶ In the Eighteenth century the Jews themselves were generally not looking for political rights; rather they wanted to be left alone to live in peace. However, the French Revolution had just begun, and when the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen was drafted, the Jews submitted their

⁶ Esther Benbassa, *The Jews of France: A History from Antiquity to the Present* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), 78.

grievances about the disparity between the Jews and the rest of French society. At the same time, riots broke out in Alsace, and the Jews were held responsible for the resulting strife. Also during this time, religious tolerance was granted to all non-Catholics through the 1787 Edict of Versailles.⁷ With this edict of toleration, French Calvinists, Protestants, and Jews were given the freedom to practice their own religion, but the Jews still desired more. It was in this setting that, on August 26, 1789, the Parisian Jews wrote to the National Assembly demanding the right of citizenship.⁸ Debate over the place of the Jews continued on for months. During a discussion on December 23, 1789, Stanislas de Clermont-Tonnerre asserted that the Jews, “must make up neither a political body nor an order within the State; they must individually be citizens.”⁹ Clermont-Tonnere is referring to the communal status that the Jews in France had. The Jewish people had their own independent communities, which provided educational, social, and medical services for their people. Previously, as long as the Jews paid their taxes, the government was not concerned with how they lived their lives.¹⁰ However, if the Jews wanted to gain French citizenship, they would lose the right to group autonomy. The French were willing to accept other peoples into their culture and society as long as the other peoples first renounced any other group ties.

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On September 27, 1791 Jews in France were granted citizenship by a proclamation known as the Emancipation of the Jews, but only if they gave up their communal status. Citizenship for Jews was something the National Assembly was willing to grant, but it came with a price. However, the French Jews were the first in Europe to be emancipated. The Emancipation of the Jews set precedence for the future relationship between Jewish identity and French citizenship. Giving up their communal status was not the first time French Jews would be asked to give up part of themselves to better fit with French identity.

One hundred years after gaining French citizenship, the French Jews would be confronted with one of the most noteworthy events in French Jewish history, the Dreyfus Affair. The Dreyfus Affair set off a flurry of anti-Semitic feelings in France and caused quite a stir throughout Europe. In September 1894, Captain Alfred Dreyfus, a French Jew, was accused by French army intelligence of penning a letter, known as the *bordereau*, to the German military attaché at the embassy in Paris.¹¹ Although Dreyfus professed his innocence, he was arrested and put in prison in October, convicted of treason December 22, and sentenced to “life in a fortified compound” on Devil’s Island.¹² Dreyfus appealed his case, but the request was rejected.

While Dreyfus’s sentence did not originally raise any controversy, other than amongst Jews, new information came to light in 1896 that cast doubt on his conviction. A French journalist’s exposure of the

¹¹ Benbassa, 141.

¹² Ibid.

Dreyfus case's conflicting findings led to public division on the matter. The public tended to side with one of two groups, the Dreyfusards and the anti-Dreyfusards. The Dreyfusards sought to defend justice and the rights of man, in addition to rehabilitating the victim. Dreyfusards also tended to be anti-military and anti-Catholic. The anti-Dreyfusards did not want a review of the case. This group tended to attract military men, anti-Semites, and Catholics. The clashing views on the case evolved into an overall disagreement on politics in general. The anger and resentment of both sides were so consuming that President Emile Loubet pardoned Dreyfus in September 1899 to try to put an end to the passions enflamed by the affair. Dreyfus was finally granted rehabilitation and reinstated in the army in July 1906.¹³ It is also important to note that in the midst of the Dreyfus affair France passed an act known as the Separation of Church and State in December 1905.¹⁴ This policy was the cornerstone for maintaining a strong secular state, something that would be a defining characteristic of the French state in years to come, however, also something that would be challenged under Vichy.

The interwar period saw a large influx of Jewish immigrants to France from other parts of Europe. Around 200,000 Jewish immigrants arrived in France between 1906 and 1939, making up fifteen percent of total immigration during that period.¹⁵ Due to the high death toll of World War I, France was in need of laborers, so the large number of immigrants was not

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met with the disdain one might expect. However, these Jews were different from the French Jews. The immigrant Jews practiced a Judaism that “did not separate the secular from religious, the individual from the community, the private sphere from the public sphere, or the fact of belonging to a people from belonging to a religion.”¹⁶ The reason the French Jews were accepted in France was that they were willing to give up some of their own cultural identity and fully embrace being French citizens. These immigrant Jews were still holding on to the communal status that the French Jews had given up over a century before. French non-Jews saw the values of the immigrant Jews as not cohesive with, and in some ways even a betrayal of, French secular values. A testament to this difference can be seen in the experience of Gilbert Michlin. He recalls in his memoir his Eastern-European Jewish father applying for French citizenship. Since Michlin was born in France he was already granted citizenship by birthright, but his mother and father were not French citizens. Even though a very secular Jew, the response to his father’s application for citizenship was, “the present request holds no interest to the nation.”¹⁷ France was not interested in accepting these foreign Jews as French citizens.

The final important component of the predicament of the French Jews in the aftermath of World War II was the relationship between Vichy and the Jews in France during that war. The German defeat of France

¹⁶ Ibid, 151.

¹⁷ Gilbert Michlin, *Of No Interest to the Nation: A Jewish Family in France 1925-1945: a Memoir* (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 2001), 37.

in July 1940 forced Marshal Henri Petain, with the support of the National Assembly, to form a pro-German French government at Vichy.¹⁸ Legally, Vichy's authority was limited to the unoccupied southern region of France, but Petain agreed to collaborate with Germany, thus in reality German-influenced laws were enforced in both areas. Just a week after the Vichy government was established, racial laws were put into place. One of first of such laws limited public sector employment to those with French fathers.¹⁹ Over time, the laws further limited Jews' freedoms in Vichy France. On June 2, 1941 a second *Statut des Juifs* was established, declaring that anyone with three Jewish grandparents was considered Jewish, even if they had converted to another religion. This was the first time there ever was official racial segregation in France.²⁰

The deportation of Jews from France began in May 1941, initially targeting immigrant Jews, such as those from Poland, Austria, and Czechoslovakia. They were sent to work camps such as Pithiviers, located in North Central France, run entirely by the French. The most prominent Jewish roundup was the July 1942 Vel' d'Hiv. By the evening of July 17, a total of 12,884 men, women, and children were carted away either to the Velodrome d'Hiver or Drancy, later to be sent away to Auschwitz, among other camps. Three quarters of the Jews who were taken were women and children. The most shocking aspect recalled by those Jews involved was that it was the French police, not the

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Germans, who were in charge of the roundup.²¹ While the French Jews were not the targets of the early roundups, with the abolition of the Southern zone on November 11, 1942, no Jews were safe from persecution.²²

From one perspective, Vichy's anti-Semitic laws and deportations were a way for the French to prove to the Nazis that they were willing to cooperate. They believed that if they cooperated with the Germans on some level then they might be able to retain some autonomy.²³ So in this case, "Jews became a means to an end...a sacrifice for the advancement of Nazi-French relations...Jews served as a vessel for competing visions of France, as symbols for national identity."²⁴ Despite being the first in Europe to emancipate the Jews, the French have a history of anti-Semitic tendencies, regardless of their relationship with Germany during the war. Even though France's 1905 separation of church and state guaranteed religious freedom in name, French and Jewish identities still seemed to be competing identities in reality. Learning how to balance both in postwar France was especially difficult considering the environment to which they returned.

The Liberation of Paris on August 25, 1944 ushered in a new government and brought an end to the Vichy regime. Before discussing the experience of the Jews when they returned to France, it is important to analyze the country to which they were coming home.

²¹ Ibid, 105.

²² Benbassa, 173.

²³ Joan B. Wolf, *Harnessing the Holocaust: The Politics of Memory in France* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 15.

²⁴ Ibid.

There is no denying that the years 1940-1944 had been a dark period for France. The country was invaded, a collaborationist government ruled, and the resulting actions of many French reflected this dark time. Living in France during those years was not an easy thing, however, the French did not display an overwhelming spirit of rebellion either. In some ways the French appeared complacent; willing to put up with the Vichy government and wait the war out. A resistance movement saved many Jews from deportation and death. Yet, the postwar French realized that their actions, as a whole, under Vichy had not been commendable. Tragedy, especially one as great as World War II, can cause people, or in this case a nation, to reconstruct memory. The reality of the past was too painful to confront immediately, so France created a distinct collective memory in regards to the war. As French author Maurice Halbwachs, who died in Buchenwald shortly before the end of WWII, said of collective memory:

Society from time to time obligates people not just to reproduce in thought previous events of their lives, but also to touch them up, to shorten them, or to complete them so that, however convinced we are that our memories are exact, we give them a prestige that reality did not possess.²⁵

Granting prestige was exactly what Charles de Gaulle aimed for on August 25, 1944, when, in only a few

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sentences, he set up the framework for the war myth that would dominate the postwar period. Wishing to unite and re-invigorate France to limit the divisive repercussions of the war, de Gaulle developed a collective memory that would re-write these chapters of French history. De Gaulle chose to focus on the vague symbolic phrase of an “eternal France” which saved the nation.²⁶ In his speech he valiantly claimed,

[Paris] Liberated by itself, by its own people with the help of the armies of France, with the support and aid of France as a whole, of fighting France, of the only France, of the true France, of eternal France.²⁷

These words are a prime example of how language can be manipulated to tell the truth one wants to promote. The picture de Gaulle paints is of a resistant, brave, unified French people, who were willing and able to free themselves from oppression. On the same day as de Gaulle’s speech, Georges Bidault proclaimed, “Vichy was and is null and void.”²⁸ In one day, the new leaders of France had wiped away the sting of Vichy by espousing a new myth. The promulgation of this myth was advantageous for France because it allowed the country to remain free of fault for any atrocities that occurred under Vichy, while simultaneously maintaining French culture and identity. It portrayed France as the victims, not the victimizers. This is known as the “Gaullist myth”, in that it did not celebrate the Resis-

²⁶ Rousso, 16.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid, 17.

tance movement, but rather the French people in resistance.²⁹ The Gaullist myth, an effort to tell the past based on the needs of the present, was the first attempt by the French to retell the past rather than confront the pain that would come with the truth.

After the war, the new government sought to impose maximum sentences on top Vichy officials to promote the idea that the Vichy government had not been legitimate. However, much of the evidence that should have been used against them, such as their treatment of the Jews, was not mentioned because it would have countered the goal of portraying Vichy as the betrayal of French values, and opened the door to too many other questions regarding collaboration and the general population. Since the acknowledgement of the treatment of the Jews during the Occupation did not fit with the goals of the government, the French simply moved on. As de Gaulle said, "The time for tears is over. The time of glory has returned."³⁰ To solidify de Gaulle's notion, on January 5, 1951 a law passed granting amnesty to those collaborators whose sentencing stripped them of their citizenship rights and who were serving a prison sentence of less than fifteen years. It also forgave minors, those who were forcibly conscripted, and anyone who had already served a majority of their sentence. The law did not apply to decisions of the *Haute Cour* or those sentenced for grave crimes.³¹ However, two years later a law was passed granting clemency to all who had received the sentence of national degradation. Of

approximately forty thousand Vichy officials sentenced to prison after the war, none remained in jail by 1964.³² The French were willing to forgive and forget if it allowed them to retain their positive notion of self.

The problems facing the Jews in their postwar return to France were legal, material, and psychological. After the overthrow of Vichy and the transfer of power to de Gaulle, the war torn country was not very stable. The Jewish people suffered immeasurably during the war, but they were also returning to a country that had been turned upside down during its occupation. Unemployment soared, food was scarce, the black market thrived, transportation had been destroyed, energy sources depleted, and as a result the country was seriously hurting.³³ It was in the midst of this trauma that the Jewish people slowly made their return to France. Due to the grim economic situation, many returned to France only to immediately leave the country once again. Salomon Berenholz was a French Jew who fled from the unoccupied zone to Switzerland, via train with false papers in 1942 due to the uncertain future for Jews in France. He returned with his family to France in late 1945, but due to the instability they decided it would be safer and wiser to immigrate to the United States.³⁴ Other French Jews no longer felt a sense of belonging in the country they had once called home. French Holocaust survivor Rosette Moss was born in Paris in 1917 and lived in France until the Gestapo arrested her and sent her to an internment

³² Wyman, 19.

³³ Wyman, 14.

³⁴ Interview with Salomon Berenholz. USC Shoah Database. Accessed 15 January 2011 at Stanford University.

camp. With the help of the Americans, she returned to France as soon as the war was over, but left the country in 1945 for London, where she got married and never looked back.³⁵ While these two survivors chose to leave their homeland following the war, many chose to stay and re-establish themselves in the country they once called home.

One of the biggest problems faced by returning Jews was restoring lost property. During the war many Jewish homes and businesses were sold to other French families. As the French Jews returned home, the resulting situation pitted French citizens against each other. Frenchmen, who had agreed to look over Jewish businesses while they were forced from their country, were now asking the returning Jews to pay them for their services. And the many French people who had purchased Jewish homes during the war were unwilling to part with “their” property. The government was left to determine who had the right to the property, and asserting the rights of the Jews was not high on their list of priorities. A law was passed that required former residents to prove they formerly owned the property and that it was taken from them against their will. Proving former ownership was difficult because in most cases, any paperwork the Jews had was destroyed during the war. In the meantime, it was illegal to force a resident to move out of the property unless they had somewhere else to stay.³⁶ When there was a large uproar from the Jewish community, the government claimed that due to a housing shortage,

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they were forced to treat all property left behind by those who were deported as abandoned. By 1951, only half of the Jews who had lost their homes or property during the war were able to regain their property.

Another struggle the French Jews faced in their return home was the loss of those who did not return. Upon their entry into Paris, deportees' first stop was often the hotel *Le Lutetia*.³⁷ The hotel had been held by the Germans during the war, but after the Liberation French social workers reclaimed the property and set it up to receive survivors who were returning from concentration camps.³⁸ The hotel became a symbol of hope for those families and friends who would crowd into its doors every day with the promise of reuniting with their loved ones. Sadly, with only three percent of French Jewish deportees returning, their waiting was often in vain.³⁹ Marguerite Duras was one of the lucky wives who was fortunate enough to welcome her husband home, but he had barely survived the camps and was on the brink of dying. The doctor who examined him upon his return to France first believed he was dead, "and then he [the doctor] realized: the form wasn't dead yet, it was hovering between life and death, and he, the doctor, had been called in to try to keep it alive."⁴⁰ Many less fortunate family members wished this could have been their situation.

³⁷ Renee Poznanski, *Jews in France During World War II* (Lebanon, New Hampshire: University Press of New England), 462.

³⁸ Zuccotti, 204.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Marguerite Duras, *The War: A Memoir* (London: The New Press, 1994), 55.

The mythical “history” that Charles de Gaulle wrote for France created a culture of cover-ups in all areas of society. Lack of acknowledgement through media, film, and literature led to troublesome times for French Jews, and their overall silence on the matter, while not necessarily approval, was a nod of acquiescence.⁴¹ The general lack of protest from the Jewish community could be attributed to the intense trauma that they experienced during the war. For those who had experienced the death camps, and even for those who had managed to stay in France, the knowledge of what had happened was too overwhelming to bear. In fact, Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel said “ So heavy was my anguish that I made a vow: not to speak, not to touch upon the essential [the Holocaust] for at least ten years. Long enough to see clearly.”⁴² To fight the Gaullist myth that was being perpetuated would have required the Jewish community to come to terms with what they had experienced, and at whose hands, for which many were not ready. For both France and the French Jewish community, living in denial in the immediate postwar years was easier than facing the truth.

To perpetuate the Gaullist myth, it was important that the literature and film of the time be in alignment. While there was no governmental conspiracy to ensure that the only works produced were those that sided with the myth, it is important to acknowledge the cultural climate in which literature and film was being produced. The title of Jean-Paul Sartre’s 1948 essay,

Anti-Semite and Jew, would make one think that one of society's great philosophers was taking up the cause of the Jews in France. Sartre attempted to explain the origins and causes of anti-Semitic hate. He claimed it is a feeling of passion, but one without rationality. Sartre boldly asserted that, "If the Jew did not exist, the anti-Semite would invent him."⁴³ While Sartre attempted to intellectually explain anti-Semitic feelings, it is what he did not mention that is even more striking. Sartre stayed glaringly quiet on the subject of the Holocaust. Sartre did mention extermination once, but without any detail, and did not reference the recent history that would have been key evidence for his ideas.⁴⁴ His omission of the Holocaust in an essay written mostly in the fall of 1944 seems unacceptable to those who would read it today. However, it is a prime example of the culture of postwar France. Sartre was actually making a bold move by writing about anti-Semitism at all in this period. Many Jews wrote to Sartre to thank him for not forgetting about them.⁴⁵ And the way in which he approached the topic of anti-Semitism, in relation to community, was very "French" in general. He believed that anti-Semites were just trying to form and maintain a sense of community. This directly relates to the conflict between the French and Jewish identities; identity itself being an important concept in French culture.

⁴³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1948), 13.

⁴⁴ Enzo Traverso, "The Blindness of the Intellectuals: Historicizing Sartre's *Anti-Semite and Jew*." *October Magazine, Ltd. and Massachusetts Institute of Technology* (MIT Press. Vol 87, Winter 1999, 73. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/779170>>).

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 75.

Within the Jewish community there was not much discussion of the Holocaust, save for a small group of survivors who created the Center for Contemporary Jewish Documentation, also known as the CDJC.⁴⁶ The group was originally created during the war and made it their mission to collect and preserve Holocaust documents. In 1951, the CJDC published *Harvest of Hate: The Nazi Program for the Destruction of the Jews of Europe* by French author Leon Poliakov. Poliakov outlined the course of the Holocaust and how it evolved from German Nazi Anti-Semitism to the Final Solution of 1941.⁴⁷ He also discussed Jewish resistance, as well as the non-Jewish victims of the Holocaust. *Harvest of Hate* was a huge milestone in the postwar conversation because it was the first scholarly account of the Final Solution to be published in France.

The most surprising aspect of the French Jews' return to France was their lack of ambivalence towards their French identity. There was no blatant rejection of French identity in order to further embrace their Jewish identity. It was as if nothing changed identity wise. Rather, there was a strange feeling of being caught in an in between status. French Jews were not ready to look backwards on what happened, and they were not ready to look ahead to their future in the country. All they could do was focus on survival, as French people, in difficult economic and social times.

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The overall return to normalcy by the French Jews can be attributed to a few factors. The most important factor, which sets France apart from every other European country, was the size of their Jewish population after the war. Although approximately eighty thousand Jews were deported during the war, of which only three percent returned, that was only one-third of the Jewish population. While that seems like a large percentage of the population, and it was a devastating loss of life, it was nothing compared to the loss of the Jews in other countries. Between 1939 and 1945, the Nazis and their collaborators killed some 3.2 million of Poland's 3.5 million Jews.⁴⁸ Polish Jews were left with an infinitely smaller Jewish community, as opposed to French Jews who were returning to a Jewish population of 180,000.⁴⁹ This difference in numbers had a large effect on the returning Jewish population. French Jewish Holocaust survivors were welcomed back to a large, established, stable community. The community had been hurt, by both the loss of the life and the state sponsored discrimination they had lived under during Vichy rule, but it had survived. It had not been the goal of Vichy to deport French Jews. It is estimated that about thirty percent of the Jews who were deported from France were French (born in France to French parents, naturalized, or born in France to foreign parents).⁵⁰ However, children born in France to foreign parents were often considered foreign themselves, and were ordered to be deported along

⁴⁸ Konrad Kwiet and Jurgen Matthaus, *Contemporary Responses to the Holocaust* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2004), 258.

⁴⁹ Wyman, 15.

⁵⁰ Berenbaum and Peck, 493.

with their parents. When those children were then identified as foreign, it is estimated that twenty percent of the Jews deported from France were French, and the other eighty percent “foreign”.⁵¹ These numbers reveal that the majority of French Jews were not deported during the war. They may have gone into hiding, but they remained in France. For the Vichy government, which contained many anti-Semitic leaders, French identity trumped Jewish identity, and their goal was not to target French Jews. While this may have caused tension between French Jews and non-French Jews, it gave the French Jews reason to believe their country cared about them. This is evidence of the long and deeply conflicted relationship that France has had toward its Jewish population.

The final factor to take into consideration when examining the state of the Jews in postwar France is the role of trauma. When dealing with the Holocaust, trauma seems to be the most important aspect of the postwar period. It was the trauma of the Occupation that caused the French people to turn a blind eye to the plight of the Jews and the role that the French government and people played in their demise. And it was the traumatic events of the Holocaust that caused French Jews to close themselves off to the realities that came with the postwar experience. Even if members of the French Jewish community had not been deported, the mere knowledge of the Final Solution was distressing in itself. The first ten years after the war was insufficient time to process the tragedies that had occurred. It was not until later that the

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French people were able to come to terms with their past.

The French Jews were able to distract themselves from the problems that arose in the postwar period with the arrival of the Algerian Jews in the late 1950's, while France turned its attention to other problems, such as their wars in Indochina and then Algeria. It was only in the 1970's that the Gaullist myth began to crack. Documents and information that had been suppressed for decades were released. An environment of obsession to discover the truth emerged in France. Nothing inspired a greater desire for knowledge than the trial of war criminal Klaus Barbie in 1983. SS Captain Klaus Barbie was the head of the Lyon security police from 1942 to 1944. Nearly forty years after the war had ended, Barbie was finally brought back to France to stand trial for crimes against humanity. The trial was symbolic because it showed a willingness on the part of the French government to come to terms with the atrocities that occurred in France during the war. It gave the people of France a reason to question what had happened, and slowly the truth started to flow. The trial also showed the importance collective memory played in postwar France. The trial gave France a chance to "restore reality to what had become a myth."⁵²

The place of Jews in France is something that has been redefined throughout their history. France's national identity makes it difficult for outsiders to be accepted, but once a foreigner obtains French citizenship, then nothing else matters. The French identity

⁵² Rousso, 213.

is complex and nothing is a greater testament to that than the actions of the French Jews after World War II. The only way the French Jews were able to remain in France and live with what happened was because they put their French identity first, in turn proving how French they truly were.

Kathleen O'Rourke is a senior history major with a European emphasis, as well as a minor in Political Science. Throughout her time in the History Department she has been especially interested in French history. Katie is also a member of Phi Alpha Theta. She plans on applying to law school in the fall.