Introduction: The Holocaust in French and Francophone Literature (1997–2017)[1]

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In 1995, during the commemorative ceremony marking the fifty-third anniversary of the *rafle du Ve'l'hiv'*, the newly elected French president, Jacques Chirac, implicated the broadly understood French state in the deportation of some 76,000 Jews to the Nazi concentration and death camps. Prior to that, French authorities blamed the Jewish tragedy largely on the Germans and in any case abstained from singularizing it, instead preferring to subsume it within the broader phenomenon of *la déportation*. In contrast to subsequent postwar administrations, including that of his immediate predecessor, François Mitterrand, Chirac broke with the Gaullist myth of the French as uniquely heroic resisters. Then, with Lionel Jospin's 1997 speech, the Left itself took distance from Mitterrand's position. Finally, the leading politicians' iconoclastic pronouncements were followed by other acknowledgements of institutional responsibility: in 1997 the Catholic church asked for forgiveness for its wartime silence, and a police officers' union offered an apology for the actions of their predecessors (Clifford 206–07).

The recent intensification of French and Francophone writers' interest in the Jewish tragedy, which is the subject of the present special issue, can certainly be attributed to the encroaching absence of survivors, the influence of thriving Anglophone Holocaust fiction, or the growing threat of negationist tendencies as well as, more broadly, of racism and populism.

However, the afore-described breakthrough in French memory politics must be regarded as an important factor in—if not as the trigger of—the recent surge of French-language Holocaust literature. Customarily connected with Jonathan Littell's hugely successful albeit controversial novel, *Les Bienveillantes* (2006),[2] this surge can be traced back to Patrick Modiano's *Dora Bruder* published nine years earlier. It can hardly be a coincidence that Modiano, who had been chiefly interested in the ambiguities of the Occupation (Morris 22), wrote his only Holocaust-themed novel so far in the immediate aftermath of Chirac's momentous speech. Moreover, as the narrator's search for information about the eponymous Paris-born Jewish teenager develops, his tone becomes increasingly critical of the French state that he overtly blames for the arrest, internment, and deportation to Auschwitz of Dora and her parents. Since the publication of Modiano's *Dora Bruder* many other French-language writers have taken up the subject of World War II and the massacre of Europe's Jews; apart from Littell's already-mentioned monumental novel, recent French-language narratives about the Holocaust include Pierre Assouline's *La Cliente* (1998), Soazig Aaron's *Le Non de Klara* (2002), Philippe Claudel's *Le Rapport de Brodeck* (2007), Fabrice Humbert's *L'Origine de la violence* (2009), Yannick Haenel's *Jan Karski* (2009), Laurent Binet's *HHhH* (2010), Arnaud Rykner's *Le Wagon* (2010), or David Foenkinos's *Charlotte* (2014).

The present issue of *French Forum* takes stock of some of the developments in French and Francophone Holocaust literature published over the last twenty years. Without being able to deal with all the texts that appeared between 1997 and 2017, the articles gathered here manage nevertheless to explore writings by all three generations of Holocaust authors. The twelve articles also address a variety of genres, including the graphic novel and poetry, and, looking beyond the borders of the Hexagon, focus on texts produced by European and non-European Francophone writers. The analyses undertaken in this special issue have been contextualized by a wide range of theoretical and methodological approaches, such as Marianne Hirsch's elaboration of postmemory as transgenerational transmission of trauma through objects, stories and photographic images in the context of Holocaust survival. While Hirsch's theory has proven useful in the examination of the work of second- and third-generation novelists, Michael Rothberg's study of multidirectional memory as a space where traumatic memories of violence can enter into dialogue with each other, has been helpful in reading Haitian and Mauritian

literature. Raul Hilberg's problematization of the bipolar opposition between victim and perpetrator with the category of bystander has in turn been deployed to interrogate our own position in relation to both Holocaust memory and the crises in the midst of which we live, while Primo Levi's conceptualization of the "grey zone," which complicates the same opposition by foregrounding the figure of the prisoner-functionary, serves to critique characteristically postmodern moral relativism that dangerously blurs the border between victims and their oppressors.

In line with the afore-stated hypothesis identifying the shift in France's memory politics as a catalyst for French-language Holocaust literature, it is only appropriate for this special issue to open with a discussion of Modiano's *Dora Bruder*. In "Shadow Play: Patrick Modiano and the Legacy of the Holocaust," Alan Morris reiterates that prior to the novel's publication Modiano was "less interested in Auschwitz than in the Occupation and the moral complexity that he attaches to it." In other words, even if in the novelist's pre-1997 *œuvre* we find references to the roundups, the *Police des Questions juives*, Drancy, and the convoys heading east, it is only in *Dora Bruder* that Modiano deals head-on with the responsibility of the French state apparatus for the deaths of Jews, be they French-born or foreign. While Dora Bruder herself serves as a synecdoche for the former, her parents, Ernest and Cécile, represent those who sought a better life in France, worked hard to deserve this life, and had faith in France's unshakable adherence to the republican ideals of freedom, equality and brotherhood. Structured by the work of Erin McGlothlin, Morris's discussion situates Modiano within the critic's paradigm of second-generation Holocaust writers, yet nuances McGlothlin's position by invoking the dubious wartime status of the writer's father. A son of a Jew who ensured his survival by collaborating with the French *gestapistes*, Modiano, as Morris convincingly argues, straddles the categories of second-generation survivor and second-generation perpetrator, a status reflected in the ambiguity haunting his entire *œuvre*.

Published barely a year after *Dora Bruder*, Pierre Assouline's untranslated and little commented upon novel, *La Cliente* (1998), can be deciphered as a response to the accusatory tone of Modiano's text. In "'Les Anneées noires avaient été grises': A Meta-Ethical Examination of Pierre Assouline's Appropriation of Primo Levi's Concept of the 'Grey Zone'," I discuss the prominent Franco-Jewish journalist's and biographer's attempts to undermine the black-and-white understanding of the years of 1940–1944.

This understanding has resulted from the mutually opposing narratives—*le mythe résistancialiste* and *le syndrome de Vichy*—that have dominated the public debate about France's wartime past. To achieve this, Assouline's narrator tracks down a wartime informer who is responsible for the deportation and death of several relatives of his own wife, and who, on France's liberation, falls prey to misguided *épuration*. While crediting Assouline with tackling the much-neglected questions of denunciation and punishment *collaboration féminine*, in my article I ponder the epistemological and ethical implications of the novelist's appropriation of Levi's notion of the "grey zone." This is because, for many commentators of the Italian writer-survivor's work, Levi's concept is inextricably bound up with the "choiceless choices" (Langer 26) Jews faced in ghettos and concentration camps, and should therefore not be extended beyond the gates of Auschwitz. Siding with these interpreters, I contend that, by de-contextualizing Levi's term, Assouline manipulates his readers to empathize or at least to adopt the stance of *impotentia judicandi*, which Levi implied should be assumed in relation to the *Sonderkommandos*, to a Frenchwoman responsible for Jewish deaths and, by extension, to wartime France as a whole.

Unlike Modiano and Assouline, the majority of French-language authors writing about the Holocaust in the last twenty years belong to the third generation, whether, speaking in Hirsch's terms, their relationship to the Shoah, is "familial" or "affiliative" (Hirsch 2008, 115). Among these authors are Jonathan Littell, Yannick Haenel, Fabrice Humbert, Laurent Binet, David Foenkinos and Arnaud Rykner, whose interview features in the present issue. In the conversation that took place in October 2017, Rykner discusses his novel *Le Wagon* (2010) and conjectures about the future of fiction about the Shoah. Adopting a collective approach to the phenomenon of third-generation Holocaust literature, in her article "Une troisième génération réparatrice?," Aurélie Barjonet concentrates on the idea of redress that drives the three texts she examines. In *Nuit ouverte* (2007) by Clémence Boulouque, *Jan Karski* (2009) by Yannick Haenel, and *La Réparation* (2012) by Colombe Schneck the efforts to undo the wrongs of the past take the form of a tribute to Holocaust victims and witnesses. If Boulouque narrates the story of Regina Jonas, the first woman rabbi deported from Berlin to Theresienstadt and then murdered in Auschwitz, Haenel revives the memory of Polish resistance fighter and diplomat, Jan Karski, who tirelessly rallied the Western Allies to the Jewish cause.

Finally, Schneck commemorates her relative, Salomé, who perished in the Kovno ghetto in 1943 and who is symbolically given a new life through the author's own daughter, called after the murdered girl. The good intentions behind the three novels, which, according to Barjonet, are by no means typical of the third generation, are perhaps the way to repair the bad reputation of today's Holocaust writers, who have been accused of fascination with evil (Littell) or historical anachronism (Haenel). However, following Henry Rousso, Barjonet provocatively asks whether, instead of the proliferation of narratives on the Jewish tragedy, silence and forgetting would not be the best way of healing the wounds and traumas caused by the Holocaust.

Like Assouline in *La Cliente*, third-generation novelist, Gilles Rozier, tackles the prickly subject of French people's collaboration with the occupying German forces, while additionally taking on another potentially difficult topic: homosexuality. Rozier, whose third and highly successful novel is the subject of Anna Maziarczyk's article "La Shoah dans la narration ambiguë: *Un amour sans résistance* de Gilles Rozier," is a grandson of a Holocaust victim (his grandfather was murdered in Auschwitz) and a great champion of Yiddish culture who represents the recently emerged movement of Jewish Renewal. Although more conventional in style than Assouline's metafictional novel, this self-defined 'récit de soi à valeur de témoignage' shares with *La Cliente* its preoccupation with ambiguity, as manifest in its systematic blurring of the borders between supposedly rigid categories. Rozier's novel does so, for example, by staging a relationship between a Polish Jew and a Germanophile French collaborator who, sexually attracted to the young Jewish man, spontaneously decides to save him from deportation. Additionally, the novel foregrounds similarities between German and Yiddish, and questions the responsibility of passive bystanders.

A rather different focus has Susan Bainbrigge's article "Prosthetic and Palimpsestic Play in Agnès Desarthe's *Le Remplçant* (2009): Revisiting the Holocaust," which tests the applicability of theories arisen from second-generation literature to a novel by a Franco-Jewish third-generation writer. Contextualizing her discussion with concepts such as Hirsch's "postmemory," Alison Landsberg's "prosthetic memory," or Max Silverman's "palimpsestic memory," Bainbrigge concentrates on the trope of replacement, as embodied by the protagonist-narrator's attachment to her adoptive "papi" (her actual grandfather died in Auschwitz). The foster

grandfather is, in turn, symbolically "replaced" by the eminent Polish educator, physician and writer, Janusz Korczak (Henryk Goldszmit), who cared for orphaned children in the Warsaw ghetto before accompanying his young protégés to the extermination camp of Treblinka. Yet, Bainbrigge navigates the complex dynamics of Desarthe's novel not only to reconstruct, via prosthesis and palimpsest, the story in which symbolic figures replace absent ones, and where one story line substitutes for another, but also to show how Desarthe herself finds her own voice as a writer through fictionalizations of self within these various narratives.

As Gary D. Mole demonstrates in his article, "Les 'Gardiens de la mémoire': la Shoah dans la poésie francophone contemporaine," like the novel, twenty-first-century French and Francophone poetry has seen a revival of interest in the Jewish catastrophe. And, just as among novelists, among contemporary poets there are survivors, their descendants, and the so-called third-generation "témoins par procuration" with no personal connection to the events they describe. Proceeding in chronological order, Mole begins his survey with Tristan Janco's collection, *Mémoires de la Shoah* (2001). Born in 1946, the Franco-Romanian poet casts himself in the role of a guardian of "mémoire volcanique," setting out to save from oblivion not only the *shtelt* but also Romanian-Jewish poets such as Benjamin Fondane, Paul Celan, and Ilarie Voronca. More formally traditional are the eighty-three poems gathered in the collection *Le Vent des ténèbres* (2008). In a grief-stricken and at times unforgiving tone, Polish-born Karola Fliegner-Giroud, who lost all her relatives but her mother in the Holocaust, mourns her family and brethren, and accuses the "Satan à l'œil bleu" of having deprived her of her childhood and rendered her insane. At the same time, however, Fliegner-Giroud acknowledges the salutary potential of poetry. In the second part of his essay, Mole turns his attention to Robert Tirvaudey, whose collection of poems, *Terre de douleur* (2011), celebrates the transformative power of a visit to a former concentration camp. Despite the writer's conception of poetry as "le dire possible d'événements impossibles," the poet's tour of the camp is shown capable of offering insights that are impossible to gain from textual or visual material. Here Mole frames his reading with Dominick LaCapra's concept of "empathic unsettlement," which the metahistorian favors over "overidentification" with the victims. For LaCapra, "empathic unsettlement" means to sidestep full appropriation of the victims' traumatic experience without, however, losing sight of their pain (LaCapra 78).

Mole's article closes with a commentary upon the work of a Quebecois poet, Louise Dupré, born in 1949. Free from the identificatory or didactic drive characterizing Tirvaudey's writing, the texts collected in *Plus haut que les flammes* (2010) evidence the author's efforts to work through trauma (*Durcharbeitung*), as conceptualized by Saul Friedländer. The intertextual references to Francis Bacon's paintings serve Dupré to thematize the tragedy of the children murdered in Auschwitz, which, as in Tirvaudey, the poet visits and finds profoundly inspirational and traumatizing. Yet, Dupré uses her experience, argues Mole, in a strikingly different way, "[en faisant] résonner, sans pour autant céder au désespoir, les ondes de choc qui réverbèrent encore."

Louise Dupré is not the only Francophone author discussed by the present issue that also includes articles dedicated to Belgian, Mauritian and Haitian writers. A very special case is that of Michel Kichka, an Israeli cartoonist of Belgian origin whose autobiographical graphic novel is addressed by Cynthia Laborde's article "Re/trouver sa place dans l'H/histoire: perspectives postmémorielles dans *Deuxième génération: Ce que je n'ai pas dit à mon père* de Michel Kichka." A son of a Holocaust writer and educator, the author of *Deuxième génération* (2012) follows in the footsteps of Art Spiegelman, but shifts emphasis from the father's experience of Nazi violence to the question of how to live as a survivor's child. Framed with, among others, Hirsch's seminal work on postmemory, Laborde's analysis also derives its theoretical thrust from Albert Camus's *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*. The critic compares Kichka's father, who, in educating the young generation about the Holocaust, tirelessly relives his camp experience, to the King of Corinth eternally performing the arduous task of pushing a boulder up a hill. What also preoccupies Laborde is the "dialectique de rupture et de prolongation de l'h/Histoire" that structures Kichka's book. In other words, the cartoonist grapples with mutually conflicting desires to cut himself off from a past that is not his own and to anchor himself in his cultural and religious community. Standing in for the Camusian act of revolt accompanied by the acceptance of the Absurd as inevitable, artistic work, concludes Laborde, ultimately resolves this tension. In this way, paradoxically, the conclusion of Kichka's narrative actualizes Lorenz Diefenbach's dictum "work sets you free" that the Nazis infamously abused by placing it over the entrance to Auschwitz and their other camps.

Another Belgian, though this time non-Jewish, author whose writing features in the present issue is Amélie Nothomb. Her controversial dystopian novel, *Acide sulfurique* (2005), which tells the story of a reality show reproducing the dynamics of a Nazi concentration camp, is the subject of Avril Tynan's contribution "Please Watch Responsibly: The Ethical Responsibility of the Viewer in Amélie Nothomb's *Acide sulfurique*." Drawing on the work of Guy Debord, Raul Hilberg, and David Cesarani and Paul Levine, Tynan elects to read *Acide sulfurique* as critique of contemporary bystander behavior and of the commodification of totalitarianism. By reframing the Holocaust as reality television, Nothomb's novel, contends Tynan, invites us to consider the socio-political responsibilities of the intra-textual spectator as a reflection of the genuine ethical demands placed upon viewers of genocide, displacement and mass racism across the world. In Tynan's view, *Acide sulfurique* also suggests that the ethical encounter with the other is thwarted by the mediatization of evil by screens, as well as by the temporal or spatial distance that dilutes ethical relations between self and other. In Tynan's sympathetic reading of Nothomb's novel, *Acide sulfurique* is therefore a constructive attempt at foregrounding our moral responsibilities as co-participants in both the memory of the Holocaust and ongoing suffering of others.

Moving from European to non-European Francophonie, John Patrick Walsh's and Nanar Khamo's essays deal with novels that, by refuting the Eurocentric perspective on the Jewish tragedy, can be seen as representative of the "comparative turn" in Holocaust Studies. In "The Holocaust, Memory, and Race in Natacha Appanah's *Le Dernier Frère*" Khamo asserts that the Mauritian writer destabilizes the concept of competing, not to say antagonistic, memories of the Holocaust and colonial violence by creating a dialogue between them. Appanah does so with a story of a friendship between an Indian boy, Raj, and a Jewish boy who, having fallen victim of the anti-Semitic policies implemented by the Third Reich, was detained in Mauritius. Khamo argues that Raj's profound sense of loss and accompanying survivor's guilt provoked by the death of David Stein and his own two brothers draw attention not only to the loss experienced by slave and servant populations separated from their homelands, families and cultures, but also to the Nazis' murder of six million Jews. In addition to discussing Appanah's novel as a multidirectional space where victims acquire historical agency and where traumatic memories meet, coexist, and enter a transcultural dialogue, Khamo's article considers the tension

between the historian's structured endeavors and the anxiety related to the shortcomings of personal memory, which is thematised by *Le Dernier Frère*.

While Appanah examines the repercussions of the Holocaust along with other forms of violence in Mauritius, Louis-Philippe Dalembert, whose 2017 novel is the focus of Walsh's essay "From Buchenwald to Port-au-Prince: Becoming Haitian in the Holocaust: Louis-Philippe Dalembert's *Avant que les ombres s'effacent*," considers the legacy of the Jewish tragedy alongside forced migrations in the Caribbean. Such "interdiasporic reflection," to use Sarah Phillips Casteel's term (Casteel 13), abounds in Anglophone and Francophone Caribbean literature, as exemplified by the work of Derek Walcott, Édouard Glissant, Caryl Phillips, or Maryse Condé. While continuing to chart the Holocaust as a turning point in twentieth-century European history, by adopting the perspective of a Jewish survivor who finds refuge in Haiti, Dalembert's novel, as Walsh posits, displaces the Holocaust's fixed position. Inspired by Michael Rothberg's hermeneutic model of "multidirectional memory," Walsh's analysis interrogates the ways in which, by tracing Reuben's circuitous journey from Central Europe to Haiti, Dalembert links the plight of Jewish refugees and Haitian history. Moreover, the novelist brings to the fore little-known aspects of the Holocaust and rehabilitates Haiti, a country widely connected in Western imaginary to poverty and disaster, as a place of refuge. Finally, the novel, as Walsh demonstrates, invites the reader to rethink not only Haiti's place in the Caribbean, but also the history of the Holocaust beyond its European context.

Reversing the itinerary traced by the title of Walsh's essay, with this issue's closing article, we return from Port-au-Prince to Buchenwald, where Jorge Semprun situates the action of his 2001 autobiographical novel. In "*La mort qu'il faut*: Semprun and Writing after Death," Liran Razinsky explores the survivor-writer's complex view of witnessing, as articulated with the story of the protagonist-narrator's survival in Buchenwald through a swap of identity with a dying *Muselmann* named François. Razinsky begins his close reading of *Le Mort qu'il faut* by questioning the literariness of this explicitly autobiographical text, as exemplified by Semprun's use of the figure of the double, which inscribes his novel into a rich literary tradition cultivated by E. A. Poe, Guy Maupassant, or Fyodor Dostoyevsky. Yet, far from doing this gratuitously, Semprun, argues Razinsky, mobilizes the trope of the double to polemicize with Primo Levi's provocative

proposition (maintained by Giorgio Agamben) that all testimony is vicarious, the real witnesses having perished. As *Le Mort qu'il faut* dramatizes, complicates and renews the widely held view that even the survivors of the Nazi camps died during their incarceration, Semprun grants both the "drowned" and the "saved," to borrow Levi's metaphor, the status of a witness. Also, by fleshing out the *Muselmann* with the character of François and thus endowing him with an identity, Semprun saves prisoners resigned to their death from the anonymity to which they have been confined by Agamben's reading of Levi's work. For Razinsky, the double therefore encompasses the two facets of witnessing: those who saw the Gorgon but cannot testify, and those who have survived to tell the tale. The motif of the double also enables the foregrounding of the shared character of the experience of death, where death is reality for some and possibility for others. Ultimately, the *plausibility* of death paves the way for fiction, which can serve to render better the camp experience, facts themselves being sometimes wanting.

This final point inspires Razinsky to conclude his essay by invoking Semprun's positive, not to say enthusiastic, view of fictionalizations of the Holocaust, which he believes to be a potent way of preserving the memory of the six million Jewish victims. Semprun's remarks—made implicitly in *Le Mort qu'il faut* and explicitly in his major text, *L'Écriture ou la vie*, or in his affirmative reviews of Holocaust novels—can also serve as a conclusion to the present introduction. For, despite the reservations that some contributors, such as Avril Tynan or myself, raise in relation to contemporary narrative approaches to the Jewish tragedy, it is beyond all doubt that Holocaust-themed literature provides a unique space for voicing vital questions that neither historiography nor philosophy have the means to raise. As the twelve essays included in this special issue of *French Forum* clearly demonstrate, the novels about the Holocaust complicate the clear-cut categories of victim, perpetrator, and bystander, grapple with the issues surrounding postmemory, and interrogate the nature of witnessing and the witness's identity. They also confront the capacity of Holocaust literature for redress of past wrongs and successfully integrate Hitler's assault on European Jewry into the complex web of mutually fertilizing memories of violence where, without losing its watershed status, the Nazi genocide enables novelists to articulate other histories of victimizations. Last but not least, the questions contemplated by many contemporary writers pertain to

the future of Holocaust memory and to its crucial role in mobilizing our responses to today's injustistices and violence.

Notes

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2. In July 2010, in an article published in the *Nouvel Observateur* Grégoire Leménager spoke of the "Littell Generation."

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