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Exhibition Review

Sorrow, Pity, Celebration: France Under the Nazis

By EDWARD ROTHSTEIN

When the young French soldier Louis Althusser was taken prisoner of war by the Nazis in 1940, he tossed scraps of paper out of the train that was carrying him away, asking whoever found them to send them to his uncle in Paris. "The last word from French soil," reads one. "The train that shakes my handwriting is still rolling, and I believe that we are headed for Germany."

So they were, and Althusser, who would later become one of France's most renowned Marxists, spent the entire war in a prison camp.

In this he may have been lucky, sequestered from the confusions, qualifications, animosities, compromises, accommodations, betrayals and resistance of other French writers, who watched — some cheering, some fearing — as the Germans rolled over France's defenses in the spring of that year. The victors turned the nation into a Nazi fief and made Vichy less well known for its water than for being the center of Marshal Philippe Pétain's collaborationist regime.

One of the astonishing things about the exhibition "Between Collaboration and Resistance: French Literary Life Under Nazi Occupation," at the New York Public Library, is that it feels as if we were looking at scores of relics tossed from speeding trains, each of them heading in a different direction, each expressing different hopes and expectations.

There is a postcard from the man who would later become the prophet of the avant-garde French novel, Alain Robbe-Grillet, who informs his father how much he is enjoying the companionship of his countrymen during forced labor in Germany. There is a 1940 letter from the philosopher Henri Bergson, who had been prepared to convert to Roman Catholicism but, out of solidarity with his people, signed the new French government's register as a Jew. "I have seen this coming for several years now," he writes. "We have touched the bottom of the abyss. At least we will now know where the evil comes from."

Some writers celebrated that evil. The Prix Goncourt winner Henri Béraud cheered the new regime in editorials for the right-wing weekly Gringoire. His fellow travelers sampled the high life of the German Institute in Paris, directed by Karl Epting. One photo here from 1941 shows the Parisian reception for a performance of Wagner's "Tristan und Isolde" in which Winifred, the composer's daughter-in-law (and a friend of Hitler), can be glimpsed, along with the startlingly young German conductor Herbert von Karajan.

Some writers simply went along with the dominant power for the ride, if not the ideology — Jean Cocteau, it is suggested here, was among them. Others put out clandestine magazines (over 1,000 have been catalogued) or even established an underground publishing house, trying to counter the more glossy lures of Signal, a Hachette-published weekly that celebrated the coming of a new era.

Some, like Jean-Paul Sartre, made their way through the morass with cunning and swiftness; the premiere of Sartre's "No Exit" in occupied Paris had discordant resonance for those who found other kinds of hellish visions in their surroundings. Some, like Irène Némirovsky, whose manuscript of "Suite Française" is on display, stayed blind to the full extent of what was happening until it was too late. Némirovsky took the opposite path of Bergson; though Jewish, she converted to Roman Catholicism for protection, which didn't prevent the French police from delivering her up to the Nazis as a Jew. And a few — very few — like André Malraux joined the underground armed forces to fight the Germans.

In other words, the responses were as complicated, mistaken, courageous, baleful and banal as the responses of many others in that crucial time, and that complexity is part of the exhibition's point. The show was conceived by Olivier Corpet, the director of the Institut Mémoires de l'Édition Contemporaine, who presented it with the curator Claire Paulhan in Caen, France, in 2008 as a display of a growing archive of war material.

That show has been reshaped here by Robert O. Paxton, an emeritus professor of social science at Columbia, whose 1972 book, "Vichy France," outlined how avidly collaborationist that regime really was. Objects from the French archives are included, along with selections from the library's collections and private loans.

At the center of the exhibition space, newsreels of the period taken from the 1969 Marcel Ophüls film, "The Sorrow and the Pity," form a depressing

loop. And screenings of films produced in France during the Nazi occupation, including Marcel Carné's classic "Les Enfants du Paradis" ("Children of Paradise"), will be shown at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center every Tuesday in June. A companion book, by the French curators, is also being published.

But there is so much material here and it is so nuanced in presentation that it can be difficult to clarify the different stands writers took and why. The exhibition can sometimes overwhelm with detail, particularly because so much concerns unfamiliar literary figures.

A sense of disorder is partly the welcome price of seeing so much. We learn, for example, that "France became the food basket of the German armies," creating drastic shortages. Paper was so hard to find that it was rationed to reward collaborationists. The avant-gardist Jacques Audiberti wrote his novel "Monorail" on fragments of wallpaper supplied by his father, a builder, though you suspect that he might have also liked the subtle provocation of the medium.

There is also something discomfiting about seeing the well-worn card file of books banned by the Nazis in France — cards that must have often been consulted by the library that kept it on hand, beginning in 1940. But it is more unsettling to read the associated manifesto that French publishers readily agreed to:

"In order to organize a common existence free of difficulties between the German Occupation army and the French population, and thereby to establish normal relations between the German and French peoples, the French editors undertake the responsibility to organize intellectual production."

Particularly noted in this manifesto are books by political refugees or Jewish writers who, "betraying the hospitality that France extended to them, unscrupulously pushed for war, from which they hoped to draw profit for their egotistical purposes."

The exhibition explains the French defeat as a military failure: the nation mistakenly rushed a third of its forces into Belgium and southwest Netherlands, believing the Germans would attack as they did in 1914; that left the supposedly invulnerable "Maginot line" permeable.

But the exhibition also shows that a strong current of thought welcomed this defeat as an opportunity. The poet Paul Valéry in one notebook here excitedly foresees something “extremely new.” Alfred Fabre-Luce, a conservative journalist, declares in his journal: “We are at the threshold of a new era.”

Major schisms between the left-wing Popular Front and the political right characterized the 1930s in France, but among many there was also a belief that France’s Third Republic was doomed and dissolute.

In contrast, a spirit of renewal and redemption was perceived beneath the Nazi ideology. Pétain was cheered after the “armistice” was signed, which Hitler staged in the same railway car in which Germany submitted to France in 1918. Pétain promised a “national revolution” enshrining “Work, Family, Fatherland.”

It mattered little that France had assured Britain it would make no separate peace with Hitler. Besides, German dominance was unavoidable: what hope did England have?

In fact, we now know many people felt similarly in Britain in 1940. Had Churchill not prevailed, it is likely that acquiescence, along with Germany’s reassurance of autonomy, would have ended the war in Western Europe. The moral muddiness of Vichy’s waters would have spread their intoxicating delusions.

That lure cannot be overestimated, which is one reason that those who saw clearly deserve more distinctive celebration than they get here. The Communists had been ideologically opposed to Nazism — but they had also shown themselves willing to shift stands when Moscow aligned itself with Hitler. Moral clarity was even rarer among those who chose not to leave France or did not have to flee in fear.

The aftermath of the occupation, the exhibition shows, posed its own moral challenges, marked by denunciations and purges. Philippe Burrin’s book “France Under the Germans” suggests that 10,000 to 20,000 women were punished for having sexual liaisons with the occupiers; more than 50,000 children were said to have been born as a result of those relationships. There were trials, executions and murders.

This is one reason the Communist Party became so powerful in postwar France. After the Hitler-Stalin pact disintegrated, the party's opposition to Hitler was unswerving, beyond question.

This is not, though, a tale of heroism or far-ranging insight. Though Mr. Paxton shows that poets were, as a group, particularly resistant to the collaborationist lure, for the most part, the touted visionary powers of writers left all too much in darkness.

"Between Collaboration and Resistance: French Literary Life Under Nazi Occupation" runs through July 25 at the New York Public Library, Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street; (212) 930-0800, nypl.org.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: April 30, 2009

An exhibition review on Saturday about "Between Collaboration and Resistance: French Literary Life Under Nazi Occupation" at the New York Public Library, which has newsreels of the period taken from the film "The Sorrow and the Pity" on display, misidentified the director of that film. He is Marcel Ophüls, not his father, the filmmaker Max Ophüls.