

Speech for “Étoilement: The Starring Effect”

Hélène Berr wrote in her journal on October 10, 1943: “It is necessary that I write so that later I can show people what happened in this period. I know that many will have greater lessons to give, and events more terrible to reveal... But that does not make me back away from this task, everyone in their little sphere can do something. And, if they can, they should.” Hélène recognized early on the need to bear witness. This is no easy task to do. My grandmother Yvette, a French Holocaust survivor, having spent 60 years in silence, has only recently begun to write down her story. Growing up, my dad and his siblings learned never to ask her any questions about the Holocaust as she would become very emotional and agitated. I was accordingly warned not to ask my grandmother questions. I ultimately ignored this. I have since collected over 150 letters from my grandmother detailing her Holocaust survival story. Although this realization of the necessity to bear witness came much later in life for my grandmother, like Hélène Berr, she sees writing as a duty, an obligation, so that the next generation will know what happened and hopefully ensure that it does not happen again. Her writing in turn allows me to retrace her footsteps. Hélène’s journal allows us to do the same topographically through the streets of Paris during Occupation.

Before going on a walk with Hélène through Paris, it is important to note that this map provides visibility for an underrepresented narrative, that of French Jewish victims to both Nazi and Vichy crimes against humanity. Still today in 2018, there are monuments in Paris, and around France, that omit mention of collaboration. For example, the monument to the Vélodrome d’Hiver round-up in which approximately 13,000 Parisian Jews were placed in an enclosed Paris biking arena before being deported to Auschwitz, proclaims that, while it was the French police who carried out the deportations, they only did so under Nazi orders. There is no mention as to how many of the French willingly collaborated. Such an omission, which notably allows France to maintain a cleaner national conscience, is a threat both to the memory of those who lost their lives due to French anti-Semitic policies and collaboration in the Final Solution and to an effort to ensure that future genocides be prevented. Set in stone, this nationalistic motivated telling of history – free of Nazi complicity – cannot be easily undone. This project, however, forms its own monument to victims of Vichy anti-Semitic policies and collaboration providing a platform for visual history testimonies, journals, and post-Holocaust literature on the map of a city taken away from many of these victims.

Hélène Berr lived at 5, avenue Élisée-Reclus around the corner from the Eiffel Tower and only a short walk away from the Vélodrome d’Hiver where the mass round-up of Jews in the summer of 1942 took place. In her diary, Hélène paints a picture of Paris during the Occupation around her home. Through the map, her words are brought to life. On June 29, 1942, Hélène describes an encounter she had as she walked home along avenue de la Bourdonnais. A man introduced himself to her as a “French catholic shaking your hand.” She reflects that in the

streets, “one is constantly obliged” to present oneself. It is an “ordeal to go out.” Material from the USC Shoah’s Visual History Archives in conjunction with H  l  ne’s written testimony aids in creating a more comprehensive picture of life for a young Jewish woman during Occupation. Claude Bloch lived at 73, quai d’Orsay, only a few blocks from H  l  ne. They both came from well off, assimilated Jewish families, whom, like my grandmother often stresses, felt they were French first and Jewish second. The war would change this. On the map, we can listen to Claude Bloch give testimony by clicking on her childhood home. Claude talks about her relationship with Judaism. Her father experienced anti-Semitism during the Dreyfus Affair. Her parents consequentially decided not to raise her Jewish. When she was around 7-years-old, Claude describes playing at the Champs de Mars and a girl saying to her “I don’t want to play with you because you are Jewish.” Claude did not know what that was. During the Vichy era, this once unknown facet of her identity was legally imposed on Claude, like it was on H  l  ne and my grandmother. The map allows their stories and their complicated identities to gain visibility.

Claude ultimately escaped to the South of France where she would join the Resistance while H  l  ne remained in Paris and worked for UGIF, a Jewish social aid group founded in 1941 that worked with German and collaborating forces. H  l  ne describes in her diary why she joined: “to do something, to be close to the horrors. And at the service of those interned, we do what we can. Those who know us well, understand, and judge us justly.” Through her descriptions of her work for UGIF, H  l  ne serves as a sort of tour guide through Paris. On one occasion, in October 1942, she describes a two hour walk she took through the city with four Jewish children from UGIF. They went from the Palais Royal to rue Claude Bernard where a UGIF children’s home was located. H  l  ne writes: “I showed them the Louvre from all sides. I am enthusiastic myself. From the pont des Arts, I watched the sun pierce the grey fog, like a promise of joy.” We can trace her trajectory on the map, which in turn adds a new dimension of reality to a girl whose experiences in Occupied France can seem distant and even unimaginable.

Hélène was a student at the Sorbonne. After classes one day in April 1942, she describes walking with her friend, André, to the Jardin du Luxembourg. She writes: “The strange walk through known streets, that I no longer know, the rue de l’Ecole-de-Médecine, the rue Antoine-Dubois, the rue de Medicis.” When they arrived at the garden, Hélène and André sat by the water basin in the sun and watched the toy sailboats. A picture attached to the garden’s point illustrates a similar scene. Hélène goes on to detail an uncomfortable conversation she shared with André. André stated that “the Germans are going to win the war.” Hélène disagreed and asked in return “what will become of us if the Germans win?” “Nothing will change, there will always be sun and water,” André responded. Hélène sitting in the gardens in the sun looking at the water understood that, much like the streets she no longer knew and could no longer walk through with the same sense of safety and belonging, things would change. She replied: “but [the Germans] will not let everyone enjoy the sun and the water!” Hélène would some time later be

thrown out of the gardens as she was a Jew. Paris was taken from Hélène. In placing her and her writing on the map, we can return the city to her.

If we continue from the water basin at the Jardin du Luxembourg, down the boulevard St. Michel, turning left onto avenue du parc du Montsouris, cut through the park, walk by the Cité Internationale Universitaire, take boulevard Kellerman passing the Société des Moteurs Gnome et Rhône until it merges into boulevard Masséna, we will arrive at my grandmother's house. From 1935 to 1942, my grandma lived at 129, boulevard Masséna with her mother, father, and uncle. My grandmother lost most of her immediate family during the war. Her father, Ephim, was sent on the last train from France to Auschwitz in August 1944. He died following a death march to Mauthausen. Her uncle Hermann escaped a French internment camp. He then fled the country crossing the Pyrenees with the Armée Juive. Hermann died in Lisbon in 1943 of the tuberculosis he contracted in the camp. Her mother survived the war, but went insane from the trauma. Despite survivor accounts confirming her husband had been murdered, she spent the rest of her life in Berlin hoping to find Ephim.

I showed my grandmother the map last week. On seeing this photo attached to her childhood home, she became emotional. This is my grandmother at the Catholic communion of her friend from the building Gisèle Marigot in spring 1942. My grandmother decided to rip the yellow star off her dress for the occasion as a "sign of respect" for the family of Gisèle. That was the last time she wore the star. One of the themes of the map is "tying up loose threads" and bringing them together to try and create an image of the time. If you look closely at the picture, several threads on my grandmother's dress are loose from where she tore off the star. Even once the star was off, it left a mark. I think that the map succeeds in creating a powerful monument to the victims through the dark stains and ripped threads. It also, after the fact, "welcomes" them back to Paris through the act of inserting them on a digital topography of the city. This monument could in turn be read as a counter narrative to those presented on many French monuments such as the one for the Vélodrome d'Hiver. In response to seeing the map, my grandmother explained how she was "so glad this is coming to surface." Whereas my grandmother would have once perhaps drawn attention away from the loose threads and the "années noires [dark years]" more generally, she now stresses to me the importance of shining a light on them.