

The evil that has no explanation.

Innocence and Experience

BY ANDRE ACIMAN

I

I am Pierre's little brother." The sentence is spoken by a little boy who has just been asked his name. The boy can't remember his name. All he knows is that he is Pierre's *petit frere*, that Pierre knows everything about him, that one had better ask Pierre such questions since, in the young boy's imagination, everything about him is already subsumed in Pierre. They are one and the same person. Pierre is just the bigger version.

Until recently, Pierre's little brother never had to give anyone his name, or turn to anyone who didn't know it. He had probably never strayed far enough from home to have to know more about himself. But at Drancy, the temporary transit camp near Paris, which saw the deportation of 61,000 of the 75,700 Jews from France, Pierre has disappeared, or is nowhere to be found, or has been taken away; as have his parents. The little boy feels so thoroughly stranded that, had he even known his name, fear, shock, and a profound sense of loss and displacement might have prevented him from remembering it.

According to Serge Klarsfeld's brief but very moving account in *French Children of the Holocaust*, there were many more boys and girls like Pierre's little brother at Drancy. And as Odette Daltroff-Baticie, an eyewitness in 1943, writes in a passage quoted by Klarsfeld, "the names and addresses [that the children's] mothers wrote on their clothes have been erased by rain; or else, either inadvertently or while playing, they traded clothes with another child." Children are malleable. In less than six months, a boy might acquire a new name, a new home, new clothes, new siblings. At that age, a child is a wax slate on which whatever is written can be easily overwritten. Nothing that we give our children sticks unless we are there to give it again tomorrow. Identity is

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seldom more than a scatter of memories over which we apply the same coat for good measure each day. Change the dye, alter the props, jostle the facts hard enough and early enough, and you have, more or less, a new human being.

This may be a tribute to the miracle of survival; but it is also a galling affront to what we would like to think are eternal truths about others, about those we love, about ourselves. Our core exists, does it not? And old wounds flare up, don't they? Well, maybe they don't. Sometimes the pressure is too great to resist. Memory drives a hard bargain, but the soul sells out in the end. So who is the real Benjamin Wilkomirski? And whatever happened to Edgardo Mortara, kidnapped by the Pope's agents and

*French Children of the Holocaust:
A Memorial*

by Serge Klarsfeld

(New York University Press, 1,881 pp., \$95)

Fragments:

Memories of a Wartime Childhood

by Benjamin Wilkomirski

translated by Carol Brown Janeway

(Schocken, 155 pp., \$20)

The Kidnapping of Edgardo Mortara

by David I. Kertzer

(Knopf, 350 pp., \$26)

forcibly converted a century ago? And what of all the converted Jewish children—the Hidden Jews, as they are called—who still do not know that they were entrusted to Catholic families during the Holocaust and whose identity and whereabouts the church still will not reveal?

For Pierre's little brother, however, these questions are moot. Like many other children who were wrenched from their mothers' arms and arrived in "filthy, deplorable and unimaginable conditions"—"a cloud of insects surrounds them, and a terrible stench"—Pierre's brother is awaiting transport to Poland, where he is to be reunited with his family. Dysentery and its attendant ills are commonplace at Drancy. Few of the children know what the word "trans-

port" really means, and none is able to read the deadly irony behind the promise of their final "reunification." But when the time comes to leave the packed stairwell of Drancy, where Jewish children have been jammed for days in filth, all begin to struggle desperately against the gendarmes who are violently dragging them downstairs.

Many of the children had already suffered "brutal mistreatment by the French police and administration," and must have sensed that such summary cruelty could only bode worse once they reached those places where their parents were allegedly expecting them. Still, despite their panic and their wailing and the sense that all this leads to death and nothing else, none of them, not even their parents who had preceded them on the journey east, could imagine the unimaginable. That is what terror is all about.

Next to the manufacture of death, the greatest invention of the Third Reich was the manufacture of fear. It degraded millions, forcing out the worst childhood monsters that every adult likes to think have been outgrown, overcome, put behind. What could be more terrifying than to be thrown back to one's earliest nightmares, to have them magnified a thousandfold, and find no solace anywhere—except, perhaps, in the conciliatory words with which SS officers would sometimes delude passengers upon their arrival at the death camps? And what could be more desperate than to watch one's father suddenly revert to a helpless, defenseless shell of a man, shouted down, overpowered, and taken away by men wielding whips and firearms?

It is small wonder that some of the most powerful pages in Elie Wiesel's *Night*, in Yehuda Nir's *The Lost Childhood*, and in Benjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments* are not just about children experiencing and witnessing physical and psychological trauma, but about children who experienced the ultimate indignity of watching their own fathers become frightened children, then weep, then waste away, and sometimes turn to their own children for the reassurance and the protection that they themselves could no longer provide, in a world in which fear and sorrow do not ennoble the victim but degrade him, and in his degradation compel the victim to feel almost as loathsome to himself as he is to his executioner. "I felt like a squashed caterpillar oozing in the dust," thinks Jerzy Kosinski's boy in *The Painted Bird*. "I was genuinely ashamed of my appearance. I had nothing against his killing me."

On August 24, 1942, Convoy 23 left Drancy for Auschwitz. Scarcely two days later, its passengers were gassed and burned. It is not clear whether Pierre's brother was on that train. Among the names on that convoy is passenger No. 146, the 80th on a deportation list that was obtained by the Contemporary Jewish Documentation Center after the liberation of Paris. Deportee Number 146, like deportee Number 122 on that same convoy, is simply listed as "*un enfant sans identite*." Of the 11,402 children deported, perhaps 300 survived. In all, 75,700 Jews were deported from France. 2,564 returned. An organization was created in 1943 to document the persecution of the Jews of France. But deportation lists were jealously guarded and never released to Jewish organizations. Thus Klarsfeld.

French Children of the Holocaust is longer than the Manhattan Yellow Pages—it is 1,881 pages, to be exact. It is, according to its subtitle, *A Memorial*. As in English, the French title, "*Memorial ties enfants Juifs deportes de France*," indicates the purpose of the book clearly enough: to memorialize, to preserve the memory of children who died in the Holocaust. But the two titles mean different things. In English, the title suggests that the children being commemorated in this volume were French: "French Children...." In the French, the title suggests that they were not necessarily French; they were simply deported from France.

This is not an insignificant detail.

Many of the children mentioned in Klarsfeld's book were born outside France. (Klarsfeld is himself a Romanian Jew.) The Vichy regime, moreover, while not unwilling to hand over to the Nazis Jews who had immigrated to France and were stripped of their recently-acquired citizenship, was quite eager to protect French Jews. Even Laval and Petain insisted on differentiating between French Jews and foreign Jews, so as to protect their own nationals. (The distinction was frequently obscured, either intentionally, so as to fulfill the German monthly quota of Jewish deportees, or through incompetence.)

But finally this is a minor point in a unique book. On the surface, Klarsfeld's *French Children of the Holocaust* provides a history of the war that Hitler and his eager French acolytes waged against Jewish children (and their parents) living in France. All the most terrible moments of the French Holocaust are touched on: the infamous herding of Jews into the Velodrome d'Hiver, where they were penned under abominable conditions; the ineffectual protest of Catholic cardinals, whose prelates did not even take up the matter at their pulpits; the excruciating tale of Jewish parents who were willing never to see their children again rather than lead the authorities to their hiding places. We read also of the last-

Fear dismembers the self, tearing up identity until what remains, as Wilkimirski shows, are nothing more than tatters, fragments, a self that no longer has solidarity with itself or with others—which explains why it yearns for it in others, or why, as in the case of Pierre's little brother, it can only define itself in terms of others. "I cannot forget the voice of one little four-year-old boy," writes Daltroff-Baticie, "repeating over and over in a grave, monotone voice, a voice too grave for his small body, 'Maman, I'm going to be afraid, Maman, I'm going to be afraid.'" Or, as Julie Cremieux-Dunand, another eyewitness in Klarsfeld's book, remembers: "These small beings, whose mothers or parents had been deported a few days earlier, implored us to lead them to their Maman. A few of them, a little older, or more intuitive, already skeptical, told us that they knew they would never see her again. We saw a small boy of eight throw himself on his little sister, take her in his arms and cry out, 'Don't let them take her away from me, she's all I have left....'"

minute cruelty meted out to the 12-year-old Kohn boy by the escaping Alois Brunner a week before the liberation of Paris—the same Alois Brunner who was head of a special commando unit sent by Eichmann to help arrest Jews, the commandant of Drancy who was given asylum and a comfortable life in Syria and was never brought to justice. Most affecting of all, perhaps, are the letters of parents hastily admonishing their children to be good, or the letters of the children who miss their parents or ask for parcels—the older ones, like their parents, already writing with the understanding that they would never see each other again.

Finally, though, this book is not about history. It is about memory—"a reference work in the domain of memory and feeling," as Klarsfeld writes. Klarsfeld is a historian, a prosecutor, and a Nazi hunter who, after 40 years, succeeded in bringing Klaus Barbie to justice; and he has produced something more humble than history, and yet more painstakingly researched, and more devastating. He has done so by giving a face to these innocents. The photographs of 2,500 murdered children are reproduced in this volume. There are 1,400 pages of these photographs. It took Klarsfeld more than 20 years to find names for children who died nameless, and to put faces to names that were nothing more than names. And the search is not over: pictures and leads are forever trickling in.

This is how Klarsfeld memorializes the children. First, he lists the names of all those who perished, broken down by convoy number and date of departure. Thus, for example, Convoy 23 departed from Drancy on August 24, 1942. Next to each full name is the child's date of birth, his or her last known address, and the assembly point (frequently Pithiviers, Drancy, or Beaune-la-Rolande) from which he or she was sent to his or her fate. Most of the children in Convoy 23 were born in Paris; but none of those in Convoy 15, which had left Beaune-la-Rolande three weeks earlier, on August 5, 1942, were born in France. In all, France shipped out 86 convoys.

Following the breakdown of names by convoy there is a 40-page description of "Convoy Histories." To stay with the same Convoy 23, we read that this is the fourth of the "large convoys of children deported with adults who were not their parents.... There were two children

without identity and too young to identify themselves. The youngest known child on this convoy, Salomon Brokman, was 9 months old." Then the names are further broken down by cars and by assembly point. Among those deportees in Car 3 who had come to Drancy from Beaune-la-Rolande, we read: "Car 3—6 children. There were four Miller siblings, Rebecca (16), Henri (14), Liliane (7), and Claude (4); and Myriam (10) and Estera (8) Szejer." Car 13, however, has no names. We only know that 48 children and 3 mothers occupied it. In Car 3 of the same convoy were other deportees

born in Paris in 1933. The same goes for the Sniadowski siblings. They lived at 4 Passage des Marais. Gita was born in 1933 in Warsaw, while Daniel was born five years later in Paris. Both the Wolinskis and the Sniadowskis lived in the 10th arrondissement, four to five blocks away from one another. As it turned out, they rode in the very same wagon. And aside from passengers from the Beaune-la-Rolande and Pithiviers camps, there were also last-minute additions to Convoy 23. Among them, once again, are children Nos. 146 and 182 (elsewhere designated as No. 122).

The reason why so many children were traveling with so few adults is not insignificant to Klarsfeld's book. We learn from his preface that the authorities had determined that it was easier to separate the parents from their children than to ship them all together. The Laval administration, urging more "humanitarian" measures, had advised against this separation, deeming it would be less traumatic if the children were allowed to travel with their mothers. In fact, and as though to prove Laval correct, once the parents were transported across Europe, the children automatically fell into the hands of the French state. They would soon become a burden, tasking police and social welfare organizations. Therefore the children, too, had to be "reunited" with their parents—a promise that had originally kept the children under toe, and cleared the conscience of the French police, which had used undue brutality against Jewish mothers when separating them from their children. But it would have looked terrible for French and German railway workers to see all these children traveling by themselves in boxcars, and so it was suggested that they leave

Drancy accompanied by adults, to give the appearance that the children and their parents were traveling *en famille* to "Jewish reserves."

Klarsfeld's most powerful pages are not his 400 pages of text, most of them a catalog of names and convoys. They are the photographs and the one-sentence histories of each child. Faces that look no different from those of one's own aunts and uncles when they were young; other faces that look similar to one's own; and then—here lies the insidious poignancy of any book on the Holocaust—the fact that bears a horrifying resemblance to one's own child. The purpose of these pictures could not be clearer: to take



FLORABROTKIEWICZ, AGE 12

originating from the camp at Pithiviers: "Car 3—42 children and 9 women. Among them were three Brotkiewicz sisters, Sarah (14), Flora (12), and Marcelle (6); Moyses (13), Paulette (9), and Marcus (7) Elephant; Robert Steinmuller (11) and his brother and sister, twins Robert [elsewhere in the lists he is called Roger] and Suzie (5)." There were also three (elsewhere they are said to be two) Boksermans, two Wolinskis, two Frydmans, two Sniadowskis, two Birmanians, and two Schwartzsteins.

According to the Convoy lists, the Wolinski sisters lived at 86 Faubourg St. Denis in Paris. Eva Wolinska was born in Poland in 1929; Paulette Wolinska was

back from death what death nearly obliterated. "This book is born of my obsession that these children will not be forgotten," Klarsfeld writes. This book is a late and decisive victory over the Nazi enterprise, which was not only to exterminate the Jewish people but also to eradicate all evidence of their extermination. Klarsfeld, you might say, plays the Holocaust in reverse, marshaling the same obsession for lists and addresses that was the hallmark of the Nazi mind, tracking down Jewish names and faces with the meticulous, unyielding thoroughness of the Franco-German's obstinate hunt for Jews.

As Orpheus discovered, death may sometimes yield, but only to inflict greater sorrow. After combing through the lists and the cross-indices in Klarsfeld's book and poring over the names of Convoy 23, I looked for pictures of the children in Car 3. As it turned out, the Wolinski sisters, the Miller, Elephant, and Bokserman siblings, the Steinmuller twins, the Frydmans, and Sniadowskis—none of their pictures were to be found. For these children, there are no faces. Luckily, however, I found something: the face of Flora Brotkiewicz, who was 12. I stared at her face the way you stare at a child when you are grateful to have any child after coming close to having none. She is biting her lower lip, her mischievous, smiling eyes sparkling with intense joy and spirited intelligence. This is the face that boarded Car Number 3 of Convoy Number 23 at Drancy on August 24, 1942, 55 years ago. By then it would almost certainly have lost its glint of wit and good cheer.

Flora's face, it occurs to me, lies at the very heart of this endless, tedious, dreary 300-page litany of names—lists that no one reads, lists that are almost without meaning, lists that are no more interesting than a phone book—unless, of course, one is looking for something or for someone. As with Claude Lanzmann's tireless shots of arriving trains at Auschwitz, the effect of Klarsfeld's children's portraits is cumulatively numbing, until a word, or the spark of something in a child's eye, or a fugitive, insignificant detail, such as the fold of Flora's lip when she smiles, suddenly reminds one that there used to be life here. Flora's face is of no interest, until you see the shadow of death staring back at you.