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Gilbert Michlin, *Of No Interest to the Nation: A Jewish Family in France, 1925-1945*; with an afterword by Zeev Sternhell. Wayne State University Press, Detroit Michigan, 2004. Bibliography. \$21.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-8143-3227-7.

Review by Nadia Malinovich, Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques.

In his richly textured memoir, originally published in French as *Aucun intérêt au point de vue national: la grande illusion d'une famille juive* (Albin Michel, 2001), Gilbert Michlin tells the story of his and his parents' experiences in interwar France and in the Nazi death camps, from which Gilbert alone returned. His text is of particular interest to historians because he delved into archival sources to better understand the how and why of his family's tragic twentieth-century Jewish saga.

Gilbert's story begins with the failed attempt to his father, Moshe Michlin, to emigrate from the Russian-Polish territory of Niezwiej to the United States in 1923. His son was able to piece the story together after consulting the United States National Archives and Records Administration. Although his paperwork was in order, Moshe Michlin was denied entry into the United States because he allegedly had contracted a "loathsome communicable [sexually transmitted] disease" (p. 10) of which he was completely unaware and had no symptoms. The appeals of his two American-born cousins, a doctor and an international lawyer, failed to persuade immigration officials, and he was sent back to Europe five weeks after his arrival on American soil. In fact, Gilbert speculates, his father's alleged illness was very probably a smokescreen for a deportation that was anti-Semitic in origin. As he accurately points out, Moshe's arrival, just after the 1921 Immigration Act which put increasingly severe restrictions on immigration from Eastern Europe, could not have come at a worse time.

This failed attempt to settle in the United States made Moshe Michlin's and his wife Riwke's subsequent successful immigration to France, which, in contrast to the United States, had liberalized its immigration and naturalization laws in the 1920s, an especially joyful event. Gilbert presents his Parisian childhood as a paradise lost that stands in stark contrast to the hell into which he and his parents were thrown with the German occupation and the establishment of an anti-Semitic French fascist state. Overjoyed to be in France, where "life was beautiful, even carefree" (p. 19), Moshe and Riwke became Maurice and Renée, living happily on a modest, but adequate budget. Gilbert creates an idyllic image of popular Paris of this era, describing a childhood filled with both "French" and "Jewish" pleasures. Sunday strolls down the Grandes Boulevards with their lively café-concerts, playing with toy boats at the Jardin des Tuilleries, visits to both the Comédie Française and the Yiddish theatre, trips to the *Pletzl* to buy the ingredients for home-made, "Litvak style" gefilte fish and get-togethers and holiday celebrations with Jewish families in his parents' *hevra kadisha* (burial society) are all part of Gilbert's fond childhood memories.

It was in his early teenage years, when he entered the Dorian Technical School to be trained as a tool-and-die maker, that Gilbert recalls "realizing that being Jewish was not only being like everyone else with just some differences in traditions, holidays, and cooking," but rather something that was "for some unexplainable reason, something that did not appeal to everyone" (p. 34). This realization was not simply the result of the loss of childhood innocence, but in fact coincided with a significant rise in anti-Semitism in France in the mid-1930s. Violent right-wing demonstrations that erupted in 1934 over the Stavisky affair, a financial scandal with a Jewish bond-seller at its center, following on the heels of Adolf Hitler's ascent to power in Germany, marked the end of the relative lack of anti-Semitism in French

political, social, and cultural life in the post World War I years. Gilbert's fights with fascist children, his parents' anger at both the relentless anti-Semitism of the Catholic Church and the "bold headlines that invariably pinned everything bad on the Jews" (p. 35) are presented as preludes to the French government's refusal of his father's application for citizenship in 1939.

Whereas the painful story of Moshe Michlin's expulsion from the United States was easily accessible to his son thanks to the National Archives' policy of unrestricted access, it was only after fifteen months of exchanges with various ministries that Gilbert was able to obtain a special dispensation to consult the dossier on his father's failure to obtain French citizenship. Although the authorities asserted that Maurice Michlin, who applied for citizenship in 1933, was in good health, had an excellent command of the French language and a positive attitude towards France and the French government, his application was ultimately rejected in 1939 as "of no interest to the nation." No reason was given for this conclusion; the only negative factor mentioned was his father's "mediocre" financial situation (pp. 36-37). Ultimately, Gilbert speculates, as was the case with his father's expulsion from the United States, anti-Semitism was likely a determinate factor. The unfortunate Moshe Michlin's application for French citizenship was no better timed than his arrival in the United States. By the mid-1930s, economic depression combined with mounting xenophobia and anti-Semitism made the French administrative hierarchy—which, Gilbert aptly points out, probably did not change with the arrival of the popular Front in 1936, just as it barely changed after the German Occupation—increasingly reluctant to naturalize Jews.

Moshe Michlin disappeared from the family home in the spring of 1941, and his wife never spoke about his whereabouts with her son. His fate thus remained a mystery to Gilbert until 1993, when he had a "strange intuition" while listening to a French radio program on Jewish workers transported to the Ardennes region in 1941. Following up on this lead, Gilbert was able to determine that his father was one of those workers. Records from the *Union General des Israelites de France* (UGIF), an umbrella organization forced on French Jewry by the state in 1941, enabled him to piece together the final, tragic chapter of his father's life, which ended with his deportation to Auschwitz on January 20, 1944. As Michlin's story sadly reveals, the Jewish heads of the UGIF, in a desperate attempt to please the authorities, brokered a deal to secure the release of twenty-two Jewish men, his father among them, who had been arrested in the Landes and sent to an internment camp near Bordeaux. In exchange for working for a German company in the Ardennes region, the men and their families were supposed to be "protected" from the round-ups of Jews that began in 1942. The pathetic twist in this story is that it was the UGIF's scrupulous recording of the names and addresses of the men's families that in fact facilitated the authorities' arrest of Gilbert and his mother in February of 1944.

Gilbert then tells of the agonizing choice that he made not to attempt to escape when he was escorted back to his home by a single policeman to bring the required blankets that he and his mother had forgotten. While he could have easily physically overpowered the officer and attempted escape, he chose not to. Gilbert affirms that this was a decision that he has never regretted, as to have abandoned his mother would have condemned him to live with the burden of thinking that perhaps he could have saved her. His decision to include the full text of a report by the Office of Jewish Affairs concerning the round-up is clearly intended to impress upon the reader the extent to which the French police actively collaborated with the German authorities to ensure that the arrest of the 2, 242 Jews planned for that evening would proceed smoothly.

Gilbert then goes on to give a detailed account of his descent into the hell of Auschwitz-Birkenau, beginning with his horrific realization within the first few hours of his arrival that within minutes of their arrival in the camps, his mother had been "selected" for extermination. His own youth and skill as a tool-and-die worker led him to be "hired" by the Siemens Company and spared death. Gilbert provides

vivid descriptions of the sadistic guards, the singling out of Jews for torture and starvation as they looked longingly at political prisoners who were allowed to receive mail and food packages, as well as he and his fellow inmates' constant efforts to survive by outsmarting their captors and anticipating their every move. The camp was evacuated in January of 1945, and Gilbert spent four months retreating with troops who were supposed to bring him and his comrades to work in a Siemens factory inside Germany. His description of the "immense joy" he felt at seeing the bombed city of Dresden during this arduous journey is particularly poignant (p. 98). His happiness, he explains, stemmed not only from a feeling of revenge, but even more so from the realization that his long nightmare was almost over. It was on the morning of May 3, 1945 that Michlin and his fellow prisoners awoke to find that their guards had disappeared and that they were free to "go home."

Michlin made his way back to Paris to find that his apartment (cleared of all its contents), as well as his job, had been held for him. But the loss of his parents, the indifference of his fellow workers and neighbors, and, perhaps most importantly, his frustration with the French government's policy of "national reconciliation" meant that Paris no longer felt like home. The fact that the French police officers who arrested him and his mother were allowed to remain in their jobs became, for Michlin, the ultimate symbol of post-War France's unwillingness to admit its complicity in the persecution and murder of its Jewish population. Michlin eagerly accepted his American uncle's offer to sponsor his emigration to the United States, where he arrived in April of 1946.

As Michlin informs us in his epilogue, his career as a mathematical engineer ultimately led him back to Paris, where he was named European director of telecom products for IBM in 1980. He ends his memoir with a reflection on the very mixed emotions that he holds for France, describing the great joy he felt moving back to the city in which he had lived as a boy combined with the painful emotions that he still feels when he walks the streets of his old neighborhood that are haunted by the memory of his parents. "Perhaps to today I am finally accepted for what I am," he reflects, by way of conclusion, "but I shall never forget that I and my parents, who lost their lives because of it, were of no interest to the nation" (p. 110).

In his afterword, intended to put Gilbert Michlin's memoir into historical perspective, historian Zeev Sternhell provides the reader with useful historical background on his own area of expertise, the political and ideological origins of French Fascism. The fascist government that took power in 1940, Sternhell reminds us, was not simply a result of the German occupation, but rather represented the victory of a conservative Catholic, monarchist, and deeply anti-Semitic France that has competed from the time of the Revolution with the Republican, universalist France with which Gilbert and his parents so strongly identified.

Unfortunately, Sternhell's attempt to fit Gilbert's memoir into an outdated assimilationist master narrative leads him to a number of highly questionable conclusions. Most scholars of French Jewish history have long since discarded Sternhell's characterization of French Jews as simply "loyal and patriotic citizens who had only one real aspiration: to blend into the nation" (p. 119). What is in fact noteworthy about French Jews' behavior over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as Phyllis Cohen Albert was perhaps the first to note in her 1982 essay "Ethnicity and Jewish Solidarity in Nineteenth Century France," is not that they were eager to integrate into a society that granted them political and social equality, but rather that they put a premium on preserving their Jewish identity as they did so.^[1]

Michlin's memoir, in fact, provides us with fascinating evidence of how immigrant Jews in the interwar years blended their desire for integration with their attachment to their Jewish heritage. Sternhell, however, attempts to use the Michlin family as "evidence" of the assimilationist orientation of French

Jewry. In lamenting the fact that Gilbert's mother "did not light the Friday night Sabbath candles, the traditional role for the Jewish mother, almost sacred for women of that generation"(p. 117), for example, Sternhell is holding Riwka Michlin up to a preconceived notion of normative Jewish womanhood rather than looking to her relationship to Judaism for evidence of how Jewish identity actually functioned for immigrant Jewish women in interwar France. Arguing from an unabashedly Zionist perspective, Sternhell similarly laments that neither Michlin nor his father chose to emigrate to Palestine where they "could have belonged to the celebrated pioneer elite that built ... a new society," a decision he attributes to the fact that the fact Michlins "professed no strong convictions" and "did not think about Jewish identity"(p. 115).

Gilbert, to the contrary, remembers his parents' "adamant belief" in the French Republican values of secularism, universalism, and human rights, and reflects on how those values shaped their relationship to Judaism (p. 20). For the Michlins, who, like most French people of the day, were secular in orientation, Judaism was a cultural heritage rather than a set of religious obligations. His parents socialized with other Jews, attended Yiddish theatre, and rented out a hall for the major holidays with members of their *hevra kadisha*. They celebrated Yom Kippur but "never really fasted," and privileged a universalist interpretation of Passover as symbolic of "the deliverance from bondage"(p. 20). Michlin gives no indication that his parents sought, as Sternhell suggests, to suppress their Jewish identity in order to "[play] the game of assimilation"(p. 116). Rather, they quite naturally adapted their Jewish identity to a new environment, where, for an all too brief period of time, they were accepted as members of a modern, secular, society that they loved and admired.

NOTES

[1] Phyllis Cohen Albert, "Ethnicity and Jewish Solidarity in Nineteenth Century France" in Jehuda Reinharz and Daniel Swetschinski, eds., *Mystics, Philosophers, and Politicians: Essays in Jewish Intellectual History in Honor of Alexander Altman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 249-274.

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