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Edgar Morin, *Vidal and His Family: From Salonica to Paris, The Story of a Sephardic Family in the Twentieth Century*, Deborah Cowell, trans, Brighton and Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2009. xiv+330 pp. \$37.50 US (cl). Chronology, notes, and index. (pb). ISBN 978-1-84519-274-7.

Review by Laura S. Schor, Hunter College.

This biography of Vidal Nahoum, 1894–1984, subtitled “The Story of a Sephardic Family in the Twentieth Century”, is based on the memory of his son, the eminent French philosopher Edgar Morin, the testimony of Vidal Nahoum recorded by his granddaughter, and numerous letters and memorabilia. This review will seek to answer three questions: To what extent does the source material support the story told in the biography? To what extent does the story of Vidal add to the understanding of Sephardic family life in the twentieth century? To what extent does understanding Vidal’s story enrich the reader’s understanding of the complex interaction between an individual and his times?

In the preface to his book, Morin explains that he began to think about writing the biography immediately after his father’s death. He relied on an oral autobiography recorded by his daughter, a historian, in 1978. He also had Vidal’s personal archives—a postcard collection, letters, a prison diary (1916), and other personal documents. He reported being unable to find some documents secreted away by Vidal and apparently lost during the last decades of his life. Morin suspected that these documents contained information about love affairs that Vidal wished to remain private. Morin relied on the seven volume *Histoire des Israelites de Salonique* by Joseph Nehama to provide the context for his family’s experience in Salonica.

Morin is a son writing the biography of a beloved father. He is also a philosopher writing in order to create a truthful story of the past. He recognized that in order to understand Vidal one must understand him in relationship to his family. Morin sketched the relationship between Vidal and his parents, between Vidal and his siblings, between Vidal and his wives (he married three times.) The most important connection, however, is that between Vidal and Edgar. Morin recognized the need to complete Vidal’s story by providing the reader with his own brief biography. It is presented at the end of the text, written by one of his students, Cristina Pasqualini.

Morin’s memory of his father is an unusual mixture of love and hate. He had been told stories about his “miraculous” birth from the time he was a child. Morin was told that he was born “dead” and returned to life; in fact, he nearly suffocated during the birth process. His father always thought of him as delicate and was obsessive about monitoring his food consumption and his general health. Vidal, in an effort to protect Edgar, decided to shelter him from his mother’s sudden death when Edgar was nine-years-old. Edgar, however, remained angry with Vidal for decades for not telling him the truth. When Edgar feigned indifference to his mother’s death, Vidal found him to be unfeeling and decided that he was stupid. Edgar began to escape into his own world, grudgingly obedient to his father, but inwardly seething. This conflicted relationship persisted for decades, ameliorated by the fact that Edgar continued to find Vidal’s personal charm and childlike pleasure in life intoxicating. Edgar, who informed the reader that he relied on his memory of events for much of the narrative, also revealed that his understanding of the events of his childhood were faulty. Telling Vidal’s story is the adult Morin’s effort

to understand his own childhood in the context of his father and the Sephardic family from which he took sustenance.

Vidal's oral autobiography is also a flawed source. The reader is informed of Vidal's penchant for storytelling and for confusing facts. He did not admit unsavory details to his beloved granddaughter. The reader knows that he consciously skipped over some information, such as his arrest and imprisonment during the First World War, an event he was deeply ashamed of and banished from his collection of stories. Vidal's ability to forget unhappy experiences and to extract good stories from difficult times was evident in many stories recounting episodes of his life. For example, during the Second World War, after being humiliated and frightened on a train by a German officer, Vidal chose to remember the kindness of a fellow passenger who defended him rather than the brutality of the officer who threatened him. Counter-intuitively, it was during the war that Vidal, who pretended to be a Christian, actually felt close to Christians for the first time in his life. Edgar Morin used the oral autobiography to check his memories so that he could write a more truthful account.

Morin is deeply interested in the often contradictory relationships between historical events and the reaction of the individual to that event. A good example is Morin's feeling of freedom during the Second World War. Having remained a dutiful son in the face of his father's obsessive worries about Edgar's health—writing daily accounts of his diet and dress during visits to relatives, while chafing under the constant supervision—Edgar escaped the parental eye only when he joined the Resistance. Vidal was horrified that Edgar would put himself in harm's way, but was not able to stop him. Thus, for Edgar the Resistance and the Second World War became an opportunity for personal freedom rather than the Holocaust or a chance to exhibit personal bravery.

In trying to understand his father's behavior, Morin turned to the history of the family and of Salonica's Sephardic Jewish community. He showed the family to be Mediterranean in their habits and worldview and distinctly devoid of nationalism of any kind. They were happy to claim citizenship from any European country that protected their sons from the draft and their pocketbooks from taxes. Though the Nahoum family was from Livorno, they did not identify with Italy which was not an independent nation when they migrated to Salonica which was at the time an imperial (Ottoman) city. Thus, whenever war broke out, the family strove to keep a low profile and to remain out of harm's way until they could resurrect their position.

The Nahums (only Vidal spelled his surname Nahoum) arrived in Salonica from Livorno with the Franceses, and the Beressis in the end of the eighteenth century. They were Western Jews, who had imbibed the culture of Tuscany, and brought their modern and secular ideas to Sephardic Salonica, a city known to Jews as the Jerusalem of the Ottoman Empire. Morin reflected, "The Livornese were, in a sense, neo-Marranos, who were secularized rather than Christianized" (p.13). When Italy was unified, it recognized 3,000 Salonicans as Italian citizens. Among them were the Nahums. The Livornese became the economic and cultural leaders of Salonica. A leader of the community, Moses Allatini, invited the Alliance Israelite Universel to establish a progressive school in Salonica, where French was the language of instruction.

Vidal was the fifth of six children born in Salonica to David Nahum and Helena Frances. David was a successful businessman, an import-exporter of textiles and later metallurgy. Though a devout Francophile, he prudently secured Italian citizenship for himself and his family when presented with the opportunity. He represented big Belgian companies and became the *drogoman*, or official translator, for the Belgian consul. This office was a source of pride. In 1902, David was presented with a medal which his son always magnified by calling it the, "Order of Leopold." In later years it was one of Vidal's favorite possessions.

In 1911, the comfortable existence of David Nahum's family was disrupted by the Italo-Turkish War and the expulsion of Italian citizens from Salonica. The Nahum family relocated for a year to Vienna. There Vidal, who had graduated from a Franco-German School, had his first romance with a girl named Wilhemine, whom he remembered fondly for the rest of his life. Back in Salonica, in 1912 the Greco-Turkish War commenced, followed soon by the Balkan War of 1912-13, and the First World War. Salonica, now Greek, was not affected at first since King Constantine declared Greece neutral. Nevertheless, in 1915, the French command violated Greek neutrality and entered Salonica. On June 8th, Vidal and his brother Henri, who had sold dated munitions to an Ashkenazi Jew on behalf of the German Army, were taken to Marseille by French military police. For nearly a year they remained in prison released only after intervention from a relative serving in the French military who spoke on behalf of his cousins. Vidal insisted that his identity card be amended from Salonican to, "Levantine Jew." Having the status of a minority immigrant offered the advantages of French national protection without the duty to serve in the army that came with citizenship.

While millions of Europeans fought and died for their nations, Vidal and his family remained untouched by national sentiment. They resettled in Marseille where they recreated the lifestyle they had known in Salonica. There was no question of returning to Salonica since a massive fire in 1917 had wiped out the homes of 53,000 Jews and almost all of the public spaces of the community. Vidal secured his family's support to settle in Paris after the war. He married Luna Beressi, whose family was also from Livorno and Salonica, in Paris in June 1920. Two months after the wedding, David Nahoum died. Vidal and his siblings no longer lived close to each other. Nevertheless, living apart—in Paris, Marseille, Belgrade, and Brussels—they maintained strong family ties. Vidal and his brothers supported their widowed mother for many years. Vidal knew periods of prosperity in the hosiery business, opening a store in the Sentier, a neighborhood of Paris, which was heavily Sephardic.

In 1921, Luna gave birth to Edgar, in Paris. Five years later, Vidal felt settled in France and asked for French citizenship. He and Luna were naturalized in February 1931; a few months later Luna died suddenly. Vidal refused to follow Sephardic custom and marry his late wife's younger sister, Emy. Instead, he started an affair with a married woman. Edgar continued his studies, moving away from his father's expectation that he would join him in the store. When Edgar was 15, Vidal, under family pressure, married again. His second marriage was short-lived. Apparently unable to break off his relationship with a married woman, he soon asked his new wife for a divorce.

A few years later, in March 1940, Vidal who had successfully evaded the draft in WW I, was drafted by the French army. For several months he worked in a munitions factory in Bourges, making lasting friendships with the other recruits. After the surrender, Vidal's family met in Toulouse, but Vidal returned to Paris to reopen his store. For a year, he felt safe traveling back and forth to visit his family. But in July 1941 his business was taken over by an administrator and his near arrest on the train to Toulouse caused him to leave Paris for the duration of the war.

Vidal began again in Paris after the war, reopened a small shop, but never again prospered. In 1951, he married Corinne, his late wife's widowed sister. Their relationship was stormy. Nevertheless, it provided Vidal with the familiar customs of Salonica. Family ties remained strong. Vidal and Corinne corresponded with the extended family and traveled to visit them for decades. The family connection, more than a belief in religion or in the nation-state, was important for Vidal. In Vidal's father's generation, families had 4 to 8 children. In Vidal's generation, the nuclear couple with one or two children replaced the big family. In the next generation, the individualist ethos replaced family solidarity.

Morin's descriptions of family life in *Vidal and His Family* add immeasurably to our understanding of how individuals respond to the challenges of the times in which they are born. It is a biography rich in deep descriptions of the complex family relationships of the Nahum of Salonica, for whom family

trumped religion and national identity. During his long life, Vidal was uprooted repeatedly. Having no expectations from a nation state, Vidal was not disappointed by repeated betrayals. Morin comments with familial lack of bitterness that Vidal's way of life has disappeared. Fortunately for the reader his accessible biography preserves it for future generations.

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