

A View from Paris: Excerpts from the Diary of Hélène Berr (1942-1944)

Abstract

Hélène Berr (1921–1945), the daughter of Raymond and Antoinette Berr, two French Jews, was a young woman when France surrendered to Germany in June 1940. Her father was a successful scientist, industrialist, and a decorated veteran of the First World War. Berr was raised in a wealthy Parisian household and studied English literature at the prestigious Sorbonne. When France fell, Berr and her family were caught in Paris. Her diaries, beginning in April 1942, are an excellent record of the fears and anxieties of France's Jewish population and of the events witnessed by many French men and women under Nazi occupation.

These excerpts offer the reader a glimpse into what everyday life was like for Jews in Nazi-occupied France. There are a few striking themes: the first is the deadly monotony of Berr's everyday life. Trapped in her Parisian home, Berr describes what she witnesses from afar, unable to intercede, fearing the day that she might be subjected to the same terrors as her friends and acquaintances. The second are the rumors she and presumably others hear: from deteriorating conditions for Jewish prisoners, including her father, to the injured, sick, and dying French Jews in the Vel' d'Hiv round-up.

On her twenty-third birthday in 1944, Berr and her family were deported to Auschwitz. After eight months in horrible conditions there, she was transferred to Bergen-Belsen. She died sometime in April 1945 after suffering a deadly beating from prison guards, and only a few days before the British army arrived to liberate the camp.

Source

Friday, July 3, 7:00 a.m. [1942]

I awake with a single clear idea in my head: what they are trying to make us do is an act of abominable cowardice. What else could you expect from the Germans? They are swapping Papa for what we value most: our pride, our dignity, our sense of resistance. Not cowardice. Other people think we enjoy being cowards. Enjoy! Good God.

And deep down they'll be glad not to have to admire and respect us any longer.

It's a good deal for the Germans too: keeping Papa in prison makes too many people indignant. It's bad publicity for them. In their view, releasing Papa and allowing him to resume his career would be dangerous. But having Papa vanish into the Free Zone, and the whole business go quiet, go flat, that's ideal. They don't want heroes. They want to make their victims despicable, not arouse admiration for them.

But if that's the way it is, I vow to carry on being as much of a thorn in their side as I can be.

I have two feelings that come to much the same thing, though they are of different kinds: the first is the feeling that leaving would be an act of cowardice, enforced cowardice, it would be cowardly toward the other internees, and the wretched poor; the second is that it would mean sacrificing the joy of struggle, which is a sacrifice of happiness, because – apart from the joy of heroic action – there are also the compensations of friendship and of community in resisting.

Basically I am adopting a double point of view: for me, leaving is not cowardly because it is a huge sacrifice, because I would be unhappy on the other side of the line, but I can't ask other people to think the way I do. For other people, it would be an act of cowardice.

[...]

Monday, July 5 [1942]

This morning the second of Papa's postcards arrived. He describes his life, one of his days. They are lamentably empty. Reveille (he puts a question mark beside that, because he can't sleep much) at 7:00. Roll call at 8:00. (The other day a certain M. Muller, who was ill and stayed in bed for once, was denounced, and when Dannecker did his round he went straight up to the man and finding him in his bunk with too fine a pair of pajamas on him, had him deported, age fifty-eight.) From 8:00 to 10:00, exercise and calisthenics in the yard. Papa uses some comical terms, but in the circumstances they are heartrending. Further down he mentions potatoes. I can still hear him saying the word in English at Aubergenville. It's both consoling, because it makes us feel really close, and poignant. At 11:30 they have soup (and again at 5:30). Then they get on with the lunch menu. Afternoons drag on because Papa prefers not to have a siesta so as to save his sleeping for the nighttime. He plays draughts, Diamino, bridge. Papa, who never played games, who worked imperturbably at his desk in the drawing room at Aubergenville while Jean and the others played Diamino! He spends the evening chatting.

[...]

Wednesday, July 15, 11:00 p.m. [1942]

Something is brewing, something that will be a tragedy, maybe *the* tragedy.

M. Simon came round this evening at 10:00 to warn us that he'd been told about a roundup for the day after tomorrow, twenty thousand people. I've learned to associate the man with disasters.

Day began by reading the new order at the shoe shop, also ended the same way.

A wave of terror has been gripping everybody else as well these past few days. It appears that the SS have taken command in France and that terror must follow.

Without saying so, everybody disapproves of our staying.

[...]

Saturday, July 18 [1942]

[...]

In Mlle Monsaingeon's neighborhood, a whole family, the father, the mother, and five children, gassed themselves to escape the roundup.

One woman threw herself out of a window.

Apparently several policemen have been shot for warning people so they could escape. They were threatened with the concentration camp if they failed to obey. Who is going to feed the Internees at Drancy now that their wives have been arrested? The kids will never find their parents again. What are the longer-term consequences of what happened at dawn the day before yesterday?

Margot's cousin, who left last week, and we knew she hadn't succeeded in her attempt, was caught at the

demarcation line and thrown into jail after they'd interrogated her eleven-year-old son for hours to get him to confess that she was Jewish; she has diabetes, and four days later she was dead. It's over. The prison matron had her moved to a hospital when she went into a coma, but it was too late.

[...]

Tuesday, July 21, evening [1942]

Other details, from Isabelle: fifteen thousand men, women, and children at the Vélodrome d'Hiver, so crowded together they can only squat, they get trodden on. Not a drop of water, the Germans have cut off the water and gas mains. The ground has turned into sticky, gluey mud. Among them are sick people hauled out of hospital, people with tuberculosis wearing "contagious" signs round their necks. Women are giving birth right there. No medical help. No medicines, no bandages. It takes an infinite number of applications and permits to get inside. In any case first aid is being stopped tomorrow. They will probably all be deported.

On Thursday Mme Carpentier saw two good trains at Drancy in which men and women had been stacked like cattle, without even straw, for deportation.

[...]

Wednesday, November 24 [1943]

There's a wave of pessimism at the moment. Is it because of the winter, the third long winter without hope? Is it really because we have no strength left? Human beings have an unbelievable capacity for resistance. You would never have believed that we could put up with what we put up with. How is it, for example, that Mme Weill, the mother of Mme Schwartz, remains sane? How does Granny Schwartz, with two deported sons, a deported daughter-in-law, a son-in-law who is a P.O.W., an interned daughter, and a senile husband, keep her senses?

Apparently in Germany the Party is still so powerful that the war could go on for a long time yet. Men are being forced to remain in the bombed-out cities; women are being sent to other factories; and children from age six are being sent to Nazi schools. Children! Why should we believe that the Germans see the situation as we do, that they can see both sides of the question, that they can see the pointlessness of the war? We should not try to compare the state of mind of a German today with our own. They are poisoned;

[...]

Tuesday, February 15, 1944

This morning at Neuilly I saw Mme Kahn, who has just had a week at Drancy. She was arrested at Orly, and as a member of [the U.G.I.F.] staff, was released the day before the last convoy departed. From her I learned details we will only ever know from people coming back from deportation. She went so to speak to the very brink. From that point on lies the unknown, secrets only known by deportees.

Life is bearable inside Drancy itself. She wasn't hungry during her week here. What I wanted were details about the departures. I know the camp at Drancy, I went there every day for two separate fortnights last year; I can imagine the life people lead inside. I can still see the big windows of the buildings and faces at those windows, faces of people shut in, condemned to idleness, or else scrabbling about for whatever food they could find and eating on their bunks at any time. Just opposite the P.Q.J. was the Klotz family, father, mother, a son, and two daughters, the mother a beautiful, distinguished woman with white hair. I would like to tell about that, but who am I to tell the story in the place of people who were inside, and

who suffered.

I asked for precise details. A day or two before the convoy is scheduled, they sort them into rooms which correspond to a wagonload, sixty people, men and women together (families are not separated, presumably as far as Metz). For sixty people they put *sixteen* straw beds on the floor of a sealed cattle wagon, one slop pail (maybe three); when are they emptied? For food, each deportee gets a parcel before departure containing four large boiled potatoes, half a kilo of boiled beef, 250 grams of margarine, a few dried biscuits, a piece of Gruyère, a loaf and a quarter. Rations for a six-day journey.

Do they starve? In what must be a stifling atmosphere, in the smell of slops, the smell of bodies. No ventilation? I don't expect so. And what about cramps; not all of them can lie down, or even sit, when there are sixty to a wagon.

Invalids and old folk in with them. It might be manageable if you were with respectable people. But you have to reckon on all types being unpleasantly close.

Washing, in the camp, is done by men and women together. Mme Kahn said: "You can manage washing without being seen, if people are decent, and then when a woman is not well, when she goes to the bathroom, another woman stands to shield her." Mme Kahn is very brave, and she is a nurse. She said: "For people who become embarrassed about these things, it is obviously a huge bother." But there are such people.

[...]

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