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Tonya Schmehl

Hélène Berr's Footsteps

To prepare for this trip I took Dr. Finley-Croswhite's "Vichy and the French Holocaust" class as well as Dr. Bebbler's "Holocaust and Memory" class. I wanted to have a broad awareness of the subject before I traveled, and I felt both classes would (and have) enhanced my journey. So when we flew out I had a good understanding, not only of the Holocaust and what happened, but also some background of French history during this time period.

In this class and in my Vichy France class we learned of an event called the "*Vélodrome d'Hiver* Roundup." This was a roundup conducted by the French police on the 16 and 17 July, 1942. It was a horrible event. Over 13,000 Jews were arrested. This was a shock for the Jewish community because entire families were arrested. Earlier roundups had usually targeted only men. 8000 of those arrested were taken to the Vélodrome d'Hiver Stadium. The bathroom facilities had been blockaded to prevent escape, the water had been turned off. People were kept there for 5 days with no food, no water, and very little medical attention. There was so air conditioning at this time, and July 1942 had been unusually hot. After the war ended, newly-elected French President Charles de Galle ordered the documents about the roundup destroyed, and the stadium itself was damaged by a fire and then torn down in 1959. Many in France did not want to acknowledge they helped the Germans in the Vel d'Hiv roundup. It was not until 1995 that France admitted that French policemen and French transport system drivers participated in the roundup.

Yes, my history lesson does have a point to do with the trip.

We read the *The Journal of Hélène Berr* for the Study Abroad class. Hélène was a young Jewish woman in her twenties who opted to stay in Paris and help hide Jewish children. She ultimately paid for that decision with deportation to Auschwitz and death at Bergen-Belsen Her journal was kept privately for decades and only published in 2009. I have reread the journal since the trip and noticed so many more details after having walked in her footsteps in Paris.

In the Journal entry dated July 15, 1942, H       discusses that they knew something was going to happen. She wrote, “Something is brewing, something that will be a tragedy, maybe the tragedy.”¹

In the re-reading of events I realized that H       does not record anything in her journal on the 16th or the 17th, the two days the roundups were actually taking place. She does not write again until the 18th, and even then she has very little information. Over the next few days she adds a little bit of detail about the roundup. You can tell she is recording it as she slowly finds out information. The largest amount of information on the subject is written on the 21st and finally on the 23rd she writes, “The V         d’Hiver has been cleared....”²

While we were in Paris, Dr. Finley-Croswhite showed me and a few other students H       Berr’s former home. It is located only a block and a half away from the Eiffel Tower. As a class we also walked to the site of the V        . It is maybe six or seven blocks in the other direction of the Eiffel Tower.

When I re-read the book it struck me how close the two were to one another and yet how hard it was for H       to know what was going on in July of 1942. She was in a position to have more information than the average person because she had a job with a Jewish agency, the *Union G         des Isra      s de France*, that acted as a liaison between the Jews and the occupation government. It was a hated organization because the Nazis and French collaborators had forced it on the French Jewish community, but many French Jews felt perhaps, naively, that they could use the UGIF to help soften the effects of Nazi oppression. While H       worked almost exclusively with orphans for the UGIF, she still communicated with the wives of many Jewish elites and thus had access to some privileged information. She was also from a wealthy family with many professional connections, yet even H       was more or less in the dark over the roundup.

I think that is one thing that is easily forgettable today. We live in a world of instant information. We forget what it was like not to have the Internet at our fingertips. It was easier in 1942 to be kept in the dark and not know. When we study the Holocaust we sometimes wonder why the victims of Nazi oppression did one thing or did not do another thing. But we need to remember we have the

¹ H       Berr, *The Journal of H       Berr*, trans. David Bellos (New York: Weinstein Books, 2008), 97.

² *Ibid.*, 108.

benefit of hindsight and they were kept in the dark for a reason. Jews had what Holocaust scholars emphasize as “choiceless choices” during World War II. But Hélène Berr made a conscious choice to stay in Paris when she had many opportunities to leave. She sacrificed her life and is credited with saving over 500 Jewish children.