

# Online Research @ Cardiff

This is an Open Access document downloaded from ORCA, Cardiff University's institutional repository: <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/22172/>

This is the author's version of a work that was submitted to / accepted for publication.

Citation for final published version:

Gorrara, Claire Jacqueline ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0732-7666>  
2010. Forgotten crimes?: Representing Jewish experience of the Second World War in French crime fiction. *South Central Review* 27 (1-2) , pp. 3-20.  
10.1353/scr.0.0078 file

Publishers page: [http://muse.jhu.edu/login?auth=0&type=summary&url=...<http://muse.jhu.edu/login?auth=0&type=summary&url=/journals/south\\_central\\_review/v027/27.1-2.gorrara.html>](http://muse.jhu.edu/login?auth=0&type=summary&url=...<http://muse.jhu.edu/login?auth=0&type=summary&url=/journals/south_central_review/v027/27.1-2.gorrara.html>)

Please note:

Changes made as a result of publishing processes such as copy-editing, formatting and page numbers may not be reflected in this version. For the definitive version of this publication, please refer to the published source. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite this paper.

This version is being made available in accordance with publisher policies.

See

<http://orca.cf.ac.uk/policies.html> for usage policies. Copyright and moral rights for publications made available in ORCA are retained by the copyright holders.





PROJECT MUSE®

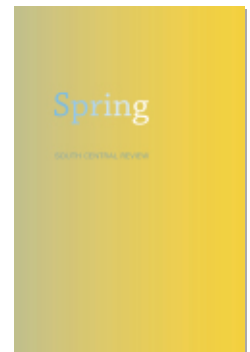
---

## Forgotten Crimes?: Representing Jewish Experience of the Second World War in French Crime Fiction

Claire Gorrara

South Central Review, Volume 27, Numbers 1 & 2, Spring & Summer 2010, pp. 3-20 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press  
DOI: 10.1353/scr.0.0078



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/scr/summary/v027/27.1-2.gorrara.html>

# Forgotten Crimes? Representing Jewish Experience of the Second World War in French Crime Fiction

*Claire Gorrara, Cardiff University, UK*

EUROPEAN CRIME FICTION AND MEMORIES of the Second World War have been and continue to operate in close symbiosis. In a recent volume on international crime fiction and national identity, contributors on crime fiction from the Netherlands, Switzerland, Austria and Italy all noted the prominent intersection of crime fiction with the investigation of the war period, fascism and National Socialism in their respective cultures.<sup>1</sup> In the case of France, the intersection between crime fiction and the war years is even more pronounced, with well over 120 novels from the late 1940s to the present taking the Second World War as their primary focus.<sup>2</sup> Yet, the relationship between French crime fiction and war memories is not a simple one. The thematic preoccupations and generic conventions of crime fiction cannot be grafted easily onto models of the evolving memory of the Second World War in France. There is no clear synchronicity of cultural form and dominant collective memory, but rather a series of suggestive and often polemical dialogues between popular crime fiction and French war stories at specific historical junctures. In this article, I want to explore a particularly resonant moment in the evolution of memories of the Second World War in France: the late 1950s and early 1960s. These were years which are commonly supposed to have witnessed the repression of troubling French wartime memories in favor of more patriotic narratives of resistance. However, as I shall argue, popular crime fiction of these years offers an intriguing set of counter-narratives with which to challenge such notions of French historical amnesia. By examining selected crime novels from this period, this article will show how representations of Jewish persecution and deportation in these fictions activate complex patterns of disclosure, displacement and disavowal of French wartime guilt and complicity. In so doing, such novels provide rich material for speculation on broader configurations of French wartime memories at a time of apparent forgetting.

## FORGETTING AND REMEMBERING

The 1950s and early 1960s in France have been discussed largely as years given over to a “repression” of the multiple histories and memories of the Occupation. In her excellent study of crises of memory and the Second World War, Susan Rubin Suleiman nicely encapsulates dominant perceptions of these early post-war decades when she refers to a “forced amnesia” over historical crimes. For Suleiman, this was reinforced in the legal sphere by a series of amnesties which freed the vast majority of those French men and women who had been tried and convicted of crimes of collaboration.<sup>3</sup> Yet, as she rightly notes, the legal application of amnesty rarely equates to a “coming to terms” with the past. Indeed, the very opposite may occur, as in France, when the amnesties of the late 1940s and early 1950s effectively prevented public discussion of such crimes, shutting down the archives and the nascent process of historical investigation. For Suleiman, the 1950s can, therefore, be more properly analysed as a period which “prevented a genuine working through of a painful history. Instead, they prescribed forgetting, turning the page on the past [. . .]”<sup>4</sup>

However, none of this is to suggest that war stories were absent from French public life. The dominant narratives of this period were ones that conformed to the needs and aspirations of the ruling elites and were clearly signalled in parliamentary debates, literary accolades and courtroom verdicts. These “official” war stories coalesced on a nationalist narrative of resistance, increasingly focused on the figure of General Charles de Gaulle, and an idealized image of the male resister whose sacrifices and imputed values were built into the model narratives of post-war French reconstruction. Such a powerful integrative myth was consolidated during the national commemorations that accompanied the transfer of Jean Moulin’s ashes to the Pantheon in December 1964. For Henry Rousso, this meticulously planned spectacle was a political act that marked de Gaulle’s careful “exorcism” of earlier internecine disputes over the legacy of the Resistance and gave the public seal of approval to an abstracted image of an “honorable” resistance that drew all to it.<sup>5</sup> Vichy, collaboration and anti-Semitism were largely taboo subjects, relegated to the margins as unwanted and troubling wartime vestiges.<sup>6</sup>

Dominant war stories are, of course, formed by their interaction with other stories of war, occupation and liberation and shift and mutate in response to domestic and international developments. With the transition from the Fourth to the Fifth Republic in France came both a consolidation of this Gaullist narrative of resistance and vocal challenges to its

hegemony and representational value. The ferocity of France's wars of decolonization, above all in Algeria, had a considerable impact on representations of the war years, framing them in charged contexts that reactivated debate and division in new and unexpected formations.<sup>7</sup> It is these years of transition, the late 1950s and early 1960s, that critics have recently begun to re-examine as a period when nuanced and morally complex representations of the war years gained greater prominence. These probed controversial aspects of France's war record, such as collaboration, in "images of a France at war with itself."<sup>8</sup> Amongst the alternate war stories that can be traced in silhouette in these transitional years are narratives of Jewish persecution and deportation.

A number of historians of memories of the Second World War in France have focused on the significance of Jewish deportees in the history of Vichy and German repression, yet there is the relative lack of references to such a grouping in writings and debates from the 1950s and early 1960s. Pieter Lagrou notes: "that the awareness, the *prise de conscience*, of the specificity of the Jewish experience in the universe of Nazi persecution had not permeated public opinion and that in reactions towards the survivors of genocide open hostility often prevailed."<sup>9</sup> Lagrou deals sensitively with the reasons for such marginalization, in stark contrast to the prominence of such a group memory today.<sup>10</sup> In her study of the early accounts by French Jewish survivors of the extermination camps, Annette Wieviorka comes to similar conclusions.<sup>11</sup> Survivors were reluctant to view their experiences in racial or ethnic terms, an attitude she ascribes to both a belated and incomplete understanding of events and to a fervent desire to reintegrate into French Republican society. For Wieviorka, some Jewish survivors even chose to set aside self-identification as Jewish believing it to be a group identity that had been imposed by the perpetrator.

Yet, contesting these observations on the lack of public and personal recognition of the Jewish specificity of genocide in France is evidence of repeated narratives of Jewish persecution, deportation and extermination in the cultural production of the late 1950s and early 1960s. These can be traced both in terms of direct portrayal and in more subtle and allusive ways, what Leah D. Hewitt calls the "haunting presence" of the Jewish experience of the war years.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, as Joan B. Wolf has argued, since the French Revolution, Jews in France have functioned as "something of a discursive screen onto which competing political projects could be projected," above all in relation to questions of national identity.<sup>13</sup> It is the "discursive screen" of Jewish wartime experience that I would now like to investigate in the work of two French crime novelists of the late 1950s

and early 1960s: Léo Malet and Hubert Monteilhet. For their popular novels grapple with the cultural legacy of Jewish wartime experiences in ways that gesture at the complex and multi-faceted patterning of memory in these early post-war decades.

**DISCLOSURE AND DISPLACEMENT: LÉO MALET'S *LES NOUVEAUX MYSTÈRES DE PARIS***

In her study of the image of the Jew in French crime fiction, Nadine Rozenberg Akoun is drawn to the recurrent evocation of the Occupation and the Holocaust.<sup>14</sup> In the 83 *romans policiers* she examines between 1945 and 2001, 35 broach the topic of the Second World War and its murderous toll on the Jewish population. Rozenberg Akoun argues against the thesis that recent decades have witnessed a sudden explosion in novels featuring the Holocaust. Instead, she focuses on French crime fiction's constant reflection on the experience of Jews in wartime France. In her study, novels featuring the treatment of Jewish characters are equally distributed between the early post-war decades (1945–1970) and more recent production (1970–2000). However, Rozenberg Akoun points to a notable shift in presentation as partial recognition of Jewish persecution in the 1950s is transformed into increasingly polemical and detailed denunciation of anti-Semitism and French state collusion in the Holocaust in the 1980s and 1990s. For Rozenberg Akoun, therefore, the late 1940s and 1950s represent years when subtle patterns of recognition and denial were embedded in the French cultural imaginary to be radically revisited in later decades.

In her survey of French crime fiction from these early post-war decades, Rozenberg Akoun focuses on writers, such as André Hélène, whose work, whilst acknowledging the fear, flight and persecution of Jews in France, continues to reinforce myths and images of Jewish villainy and victimization. Such attitudes are evident in *Les Clients du Central Hôtel* (1959), set in Perpignan at the Liberation, which follows the life histories of the transient population of the Central Hôtel.<sup>15</sup> All of the guests harbor multiple identities and wartime secrets, such as the British secret agent, Vandevelde, the Spanish Republican refugee, Ramon, and the German informer, “Lily Marlène.” Blumenstein, the Jewish character, is presented in a sympathetic light as a man forced by circumstances to flee but who has lived with no sense of his ethnic difference prior to the onset of conflict: “And he was Jewish. That hadn't stopped him going to school with the kids in his district, learning to make a basic living,

paying his taxes like everyone else and going to war with the others.”<sup>16</sup> Yet, despite this sensitive portrait of exile and displacement, the novel ends by evoking Blumenstein’s post-war life and reaffirming the perennial association of Jewishness with financial power: “Now, Blumenstein had made his fortune.”<sup>17</sup>

The novels of Léo Malet provide intriguing reconfigurations of the patterns of recognition and denial of Jewish specificity that Rozenberg Akoun notes in representations of the Jewish community and the Occupation in the 1950s. Malet’s series, *Les Nouveaux Mystères de Paris*, published between 1954 and 1959, is acclaimed as one of the most accomplished series of French crime writings on the capital city. Each of the series’ fifteen novels is set in a different *arrondissement* and Malet uses the city as a kaleidoscopic space on which to depict multi-layered histories in which past and present, private and public, intersect. City space is no mere backdrop for action but functions as an imaginative landscape onto which individual psychology and social history are projected. The history of the Second World War and subsequent wars of decolonization are a recurrent theme in the narratives as their legacies trigger individual and collective crime and disorder. As Nadia Dhoukar notes in her introduction to a recent re-edition of Malet’s writing: “The Second World War or the Algerian War leave their trace in the conscience of men, as well as on their environment.”<sup>18</sup> Two of Malet’s *Nouveaux Mystères* novels engage directly with the experiences of Jews in France during the Occupation.

*Du rébecca rue des Rosiers* (1957) and *Des kilomètres de linceuls* (1955) centre on “secret histories” of wartime Jewish persecution. Narrated from the first-person perspective of *détective privé* Nestor Burma, Burma becomes an intermediary for the reader as he unravels war stories that work through a dual dynamic of disclosure and displacement of Jewish identity and persecution. Each novel is set in a particularly resonant Parisian location for a history of the Jewish community in France: in *Du rébecca rue des Rosiers*, the rue des Rosiers in the Marais district of the IV *arrondissement* and in *Des kilomètres de linceuls*, the rue des Jeûneurs in the Sentier district of the II *arrondissement*.<sup>19</sup> In both novels, it is via Burma’s equivocal narration, both sensitive to the horrors of wartime events but also tainted with anti-Semitic stereotypes, that the war story of Jewish persecution is disclosed and displaced onto a richly evoked city space.<sup>20</sup>

In *Du rébecca rue des Rosiers*, the crime intrigue is triggered by the discovery of a woman’s body at the apartment of Fred Baget, an acquaintance of Burma and a well-known artist. The picture is complicated by

the Jewish identity of the woman, Rachel Blum, and the collaborationist past of her “host” Baget who is fearful that the murder and subsequent investigation will undermine his chances of being awarded the *Légion d'honneur* to which he aspires. The murder weapon, an SS dagger with the inscription “mon honneur se nomme fidelité” [my honor is my loyalty] raises the spectre of continuing French anti-Semitism. This is reinforced in the language and reductive racist stereotypes of the novel, such as the derogatory terms Baget uses to label Rachel Blum, the casual racism of the police and the repeated reference to secondary characters who demonstrate a supposedly Semitic physiognomy and vices.<sup>21</sup> Burma’s murder investigation eventually coalesces on the figure of Saul Bramovici, a Jewish collaborator and Gestapo informer responsible for the deportation of Jewish rivals during wartime for profit and advancement: “He is accused of having belonged to an auxiliary unit of the Gestapo and of having even delivered up Jews with whom he disagreed. And he profited from these crimes. He is a collaborator of the worst type—not because of his beliefs but for money.”<sup>22</sup> He escaped at the Liberation and fled to London to run a crime syndicate and has now returned to Paris under an assumed identity and is hiding in the secret wartime refuge of a local Jewish family.

As with many other Burma adventures, the search is for a criminal presence masked by another name and identity. Bramovici has assumed the heritage of a Jewish survivor of the concentration camps, Samuel Aaronovicz, deported with his family but who survived. He becomes yet another victim of Bramovici’s desperate quest to remain beyond the reach not only of the police but also of a criminal gang, searching for hidden occupation gold, and of an Israeli military commander, Moyes, who seeks revenge for those whom Bramovici betrayed to the Gestapo. The Jewish collaborator, Bramovici, masquerades, therefore, as a victim of the Holocaust in a hideous adoption of the identity of his own victims. Yet the name and character of the fictional Bramovici also “hides” reference to a real-life incarnation of the Jewish collaborator, Joseph Joanovici, whose itinerary of collaboration, trial, imprisonment and exile would come to an end in 1965.<sup>23</sup> Hiding in the cellar where the “real” Aaronovicz family sought refuge during the war years before denunciation, Bramovici functions, therefore, as a composite figure of Jewish wartime persecution, profiteering and denunciation.<sup>24</sup>

In *Du rébecca rue des Rosiers*, the evocation of two privileged city places complicates the ostensible anti-Semitic discourse of the novel. These locations function as displaced motifs and metaphors that highlight broader debates on French wartime guilt and responsibility. The first



location is Bramovici's hiding place, a disused house which exudes an air of loss and desolation in the twilight rain:

The house in question was truly sinister, as poisonous as they come, particularly at this twilight hour and in the drizzling rain. Paint was peeling off the façade. It was three storeys high and all the windows were walled up. One of the monumental wooden door panels was covered in posters, mostly in Hebrew, and chalked writings. On the other was nailed an enamelled sign: DANGER.<sup>25</sup>

The graffiti, Hebrew inscriptions and warnings of danger mark out the wartime heritage of the building, whilst the sealed windows can be read as indicating a refusal on the part of the local community to "see" or understand its past as a sanctuary for Jewish families. Inside the house, in a hidden second cellar, is the Aaronovicz wartime refuge, a sanctuary not now for Jews escaping German and Vichy detection, but for Bramovici who evades his responsibility for wartime murder and collaboration. This can be read as an image of "repressed" memory, one buried deeply within the national psyche under the official narrative of national resistance and valor. The dark, damp crypt, the final resting place of the ironically named journalist Jacques Ditrvai (literally "speaks the truth"), is suggestive of a burial chamber. Due for demolition, the house captures the horror of the war years and the collective temptation to erase and eradicate the Jewish memory it represents.

The second privileged location in the text is the memorial to the Jewish victims of the Holocaust situated on the Île Saint Louis, a visible site of remembrance. It is here that Bramovici is stoned to death by Jewish families, his battered body left by the gates for the police to collect: "Now, the cops moved away from the gate, revealing a man stretched out on the ground. A man dressed in a crumpled overcoat and suit and whose face no longer resembled anything human. Around the body were scattered enormous cobblestones."<sup>26</sup> The ritualistic nature of this punishment and its symbolic location at the *Mémorial juif* indicate a very different narrative of Jewish wartime experience, one that affirms a heroic war story of Jewish agency as the community takes its revenge under the command of the Israeli agent, Moyes. Malet's crime fiction gestures, therefore, at a "double" vision of Jewish wartime experience, writ large on the urban fabric of Paris. For whilst the dialogue, character portrayals and thematics of betrayal, collaboration and murder tell a tale of Jewish victimization, *Du rébecca rue des Rosiers* also taps into other war stories of Jewish experience circulating in France in the 1950s. These

recast the horror of deportation and extermination as a staging point in a redemptive journey of becoming for a people and its nation, Israel.<sup>27</sup> In its evocation of the multiple spaces and places of revenge and retribution, *Du rébecca rue des Rosiers* provides the reader with a fractured and contradictory vision of Jewish wartime experience and its reception in France during these years.

In *Des kilomètres de linceuls*, similarly conflicted patterns of crime, betrayal and retribution are associated with the Jewish community. The narrative is again centred on a war story of Jewish denunciation and deportation. In this crime intrigue, Burma is asked by Esther Lévyberg, a Jewish concentration camp survivor, to investigate the apparent return of her former lover, Georges Moreno. Disfigured by an accidental fire whilst in the camps, Esther carries the visible scars of her wartime deportation. As Burma progresses with his investigations, he discovers that the catalyst for a brutal series of murders is a buried history from the Occupation, above all Esther's own secret that she denounced her family (and herself) as Jews to the authorities in revenge for their opposition to her relationship with Moreno. Parallel to this wartime secret is that of gangster Henri Péronnet, now Gérard Bonfils, a collaborator and associate of the Gestapo, sent to the concentration camps where he saved the life of Esther's brother, René. He is now using René's prosperous post-war business as a front for a counterfeit ring. As with the character of Bramovici in *Du rébecca rue des Rosiers*, Malet's crime narrative locates guilt and responsibility for Jewish wartime persecutions squarely within the Jewish community itself, this time in the person of Esther Lévyberg. Her auto-denunciation perpetuates stereotypes of Jewish dissimulation and betrayal.

Certainly, the portrayal of Esther is troubling in the text. Her pariah status, symbolized by her facial disfigurement, is reinforced by repeated references to her abnormal sexual proclivities, her hatred of her brother and what she perceives to be her family's denial of her happiness. Her choice to assume a Jewish name, Esther, and to reject her previous identity (and the one under which Burma knew her), as Alice signals her decision to claim defiantly a Jewish identity: "Esther, she corrected dryly, Alice is a Gentile name. Esther, that's a real Jewish name. I am a hideous and vile Jew. If I hadn't been Jewish, none of what happened to me would have happened."<sup>28</sup> In contrast, René's political aspirations and commercial success are presented as rampant ambition, although, as ever in Malet's prose, the experience of the concentration camp world is evoked as a form of explanation, if not justification, for such actions.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, the world of the concentration camp emerges in the narrative as an ever-present

cultural reference in Burma's speech and self-reflection: "I had to get by on my own, and act quickly, and with a chance of success so slight that it might too be returning from the deportation camps."<sup>30</sup> In this darkly humorous quotation, the skeletal survivors of the camps are alluded to as one of the metaphorical legacies of the *univers concentrationnaire*.

Unlike *Du rébecca rue des Rosiers*, it is less Parisian city space than the profession and naming of the Lévyberg family business which fully accentuates the complex history of assuming Jewish identity in the aftermath of war. Fabric manufacturers, the Lévyberg empire has been rebranded as Les Tissus Berglevy, inverting the patronymic syllables (Lévyberg to Berglevy), with an accompanying loss of accent. This can be read from a number of perspectives. Is Malet suggesting a family desire to disassociate from a Jewish heritage? Here, the German-identified "berg" precedes Levy as if a perpetrator legacy remains dominant. Conversely, does such a reworking of the family name suggest the impossibility of ever leaving such a heritage aside, even as it is recast for business purposes? As Malet's narrator makes clear in the final lines of the text, the choice of family name and profession is an important one for an understanding of the circuits of Jewish identity in the text: "Berglevy Fabrics. Cotton fabrics. Silks. Woollens. Linens. Cinema screens for dreams? Bed sheets for love? Shrouds, nothing but shrouds."<sup>31</sup> Whilst clothing manufacture is traditionally associated with the Jewish community of Paris, in this crime novel it has multiple meanings and resonances. It is the canvas for the cinema screen and the escapism of popular entertainment. It is the clean sheets of the bedroom and the metaphorical "clean sheet" for a new beginning for the post-war Jewish community. It is also the shroud, the cloth of mourning. As the memory of loss, both for the individual and the collective, it can be read here as a metaphor for the millions of Jews deported and murdered during the Holocaust.

### **DISCLOSURE AND DISAVOWAL: HUBERT MONTEILHET'S *LE RETOUR DES CENDRES***

*Le Retour des cendres* (1961) marks a radical departure from the tropes and patterns of preceding crime fiction depicting Jewish wartime experiences. Indeed, for Rozenberg Akoun, Hubert Monteilhet's powerful evocation of the life of a returning Jewish deportee at the Liberation "contradicts the hypothesis [. . .] according to which the immediate post-war period, the *trente glorieuses*, was a time of denial and forgetting of the tragedies of the occupation."<sup>32</sup> The novel was a commercial and critical success, republished six times, translated into nine different languages

and quickly adapted for the screen by J. Lee Thompson as *Return from the Ashes* in 1965, starring Maximilian Schell and Samantha Eggar.<sup>33</sup> As the dust jacket to its 1966 re-edition underscores, the novel was promoted by its publishers not only as an accomplished crime novel but also as a modern tragedy of Shakespearian proportions as love descends into horror and murder.<sup>34</sup> Centred on the figure of Elisabeth Wolf, *Le Retour des cendres* explores the post-war fate of a Jewish concentration camp survivor and her attempts to reintegrate into her pre-war Parisian life as a doctor, and now rich heiress. The narrative addresses complex issues, such as the construction and disclosure of a Jewish identity in the wake of the Holocaust, the self-justifications of the perpetrator and the lack of integration and acknowledgement of survivors at the Liberation.

Monteilhet's text is presented to the reader in the form of private diary, that of Elisabeth Wolf, which opens on June 29 1945, the day of her return to France from an unspecified concentration camp, and ends on October 29 1945, the day on which she is murdered. This private account is framed in the letter of an investigating judge who sends the diary to Elisabeth Wolf's daughter, Fabienne. This is a ploy to persuade her to confess to her part in her mother's murder by gassing in the family apartment. From reading her diary entries, it transpires that Elisabeth decided not to return immediately to her husband, Stan, and her adult daughter, Fabi, on her arrival in France from the camps. Instead, she sets out to "recompose" herself via medical treatment and cosmetic surgery in order to be able to recreate her old life with as much dignity as possible. It is while undergoing such a positive transformation that she is contacted by Stan and Fabi who have spotted her in front of a department store and who, believing her to be a convincing look-alike, ask if she will impersonate Elisabeth, whom they assume must be dead, for access to her inheritance. The narrator, Elisabeth Wolf, is assured that she will be rewarded for her theatrical performance with a percentage of the inheritance.

From here, the diary charts the complex interplay of identity and counter-identity as Elisabeth, the returning deportee, impersonates herself in a desperate attempt to win back her husband whom she believes would have been repulsed by her returning self. As the narrative progresses, Stan is slowly revealed to be a largely uncaring husband who has used his wife as the financier of his career as an international chess champion and who is prepared to go to any lengths to secure material gain and advancement. The tone of the diary entries darkens as the narrator comes to realize that her wartime denunciation and deportation were not by chance but the result of betrayal by Stan. This, together with Stan's

affair with Fabi, his step-daughter, undermines Elisabeth's increasingly self-delusional belief that a "return" to Paris can somehow be engineered which would allow for normal family life to resume.

The textual construction of a Jewish identity is one area where Monteilhet's text reworks and complicates the rather Manichean creations of Malet's *Nouveaux Mystères de Paris* novels. In *Le Retour des cendres*, Monteilhet projects a diffuse and highly nuanced sense of Jewish identity and culture which cannot be firmly identified with a particular geographical location or narrative type. Indeed, as Bryan Cheyette has argued convincingly in relation to English literature, literary representations of Jewishness can be far more usefully approached as fluid and protean rather than identified with fixed images, myths and stereotypes.<sup>35</sup> For Cheyette, what he terms the "race-thinking" of a given text needs to be positioned within a broader set of belief systems and to be understood as projections of national identities that articulate shifting and historically contingent social and political relations. In *Le Retour des cendres*, "race-thinking" about Jewish war experiences can be read from a similar optic, reflecting not only on the specificity of Jewish war experiences but also indicating something of French collective responses to the legacies of war. For, in Elisabeth Wolf's diary, the extent to which individuals assume or disavow their Jewish identity correlates to their acceptance or rejection of wartime guilt and responsibility.

In the case of the narrator, Elisabeth Wolf, her Jewish identity is one which she is only vaguely aware of pre-war and which does not impinge upon her consciousness. Her roles as doctor, wife and mother are far more deeply embedded as forms of self-identification than a sense of belonging to a Jewish diaspora. However, with wartime persecution, there comes a complete reversal of identity formation. As Elisabeth, the narrator, notes in flashback, others' perceptions of her as Jewish bring her to re-evaluate what it means to be Jewish. In a fraught reported encounter with Stan prior to her denunciation and deportation, Elisabeth refutes the view that her growing self-definition as Jewish is based on religious or ethnic considerations. She claims rather an identification with "a community of suffering that has been cemented by the years."<sup>36</sup> This communitarian identity is confirmed on her return when the narrator claims her Jewish identity, defiantly asking her cosmetic surgeon to craft her a "Jewish" nose in place of the scarred and broken legacy of the camps: "I had almost forgotten who I was. I was very severely reminded of it. I mean to stay aware of the reminder."<sup>37</sup> For Elisabeth Wolf, the narrator, this assumption of her Jewish identity signals an acceptance of the past and a desire to confront the consequences of wartime events.

In sharp contrast, Stanislas Pilgrin, her husband and the man who denounces her to the authorities, rejects his Jewish identity.<sup>38</sup> Stan refuses to accept the objective existence of a Jewish identity in terms reminiscent of Sartre's provocative analysis of *la question juive* in 1946: "You think that you are a Jew and lots of dangerous idiots have the same illusion about you. Being an Israelite's like being a Christian, being a Jew is like being a Frenchman. It's all in the mind."<sup>39</sup> Stan presents Jewish identity as the construction of the anti-Semite whose distorted world view projects his own fears, negations and inadequacies onto the other. For Stan, to assume a Jewish identity where none exists is an illusory attempt to make sense of the senseless persecution of the Second World War: "I believe that you do suffer for nothing, he [Stan] agreed sadly. I know that it's very hard to suffer that way but it's better than giving your troubles a spurious meaning. It's nobler."<sup>40</sup> But this disavowal of Jewish identity is highly personalized as, in the last pages of the text, Stan reveals himself to have Jewish parents and to be living under an assumed name. Stan is so violently opposed to his Jewish heritage being revealed publicly that he threatens to kill Elisabeth, the narrator. This refusal of Jewish identity has textual effects in the presentation of Stan as the perpetrator of the central crime of the text—Elisabeth Wolf's denunciation.

*Le Retour des cendres* provides the reader with a rare example of a perpetrator's tale in these early post-war decades. Stan's confession to his role in Elisabeth's arrest in the autumn of 1943 is fulsome. It is revelatory of attitudes and perceptions towards Jewish persecution and deportation that are patterned elsewhere in this article, above all the location of guilt within the Jewish community itself. What is striking, however, about *Le Retour des cendres* is the "voice" accorded the perpetrator and the rhetorical strategies employed to evoke Stan's guilt and responsibility. In a carefully woven tissue of self-justification, Stan, firstly, presents his actions as a case of "forced participation," opting for the lesser of two evils in denouncing his wife to German soldiers rather than the criminal elements of the French police: "I felt also that it was nobler to hand my wife over to soldiers. The more gentlemen there are involved in a crime, the less bitter the taste it leaves."<sup>41</sup> French collaboration is portrayed here not as ideologically driven but as the result of greed and self-interest in sharp contrast to the "gentlemen" of the German authorities. Secondly, Stan presents his denunciation as an act undertaken in ignorance of the historical realities of the concentration camps: "[...] it was not easy, at the time, to imagine what a concentration camp under a dictator was really like."<sup>42</sup> Indeed, Monteilhet produces a set of justificatory tales that resonate with Tzvetan Todorov's later investigation of the mindset and

moral life of those who policed and coordinated life in the concentration camps.<sup>43</sup> In terms of the narrative economy of *Le Retour des cendres*, this purposeful disavowal of culpability (forced participation and ignorance) intersects with a disavowal of Jewish identity. The inference of the text is, therefore, that a refusal to accept the existence and specificity of Jewish identity precludes the discussion and airing of questions of French guilt, complicity and responsibility more generally.

Lastly, *Le Retour des cendres* is a crime novel about the impossibility of return. The Liberation, in this text, is not lived as joyous celebration but rather as “a moment of discovery of horror, or the start of mourning or [. . .] as an explosion of revenge.”<sup>44</sup> Whilst Elisabeth Wolf may have physically returned from the camps, the narrator is assailed by flashbacks to her deportation in the form of sensory memories that indicate her continuing entrapment in the past. Even the manner of her death, gassed in her family apartment, underscores the fact that her return to Paris is but a deferral of the fate that befell many of her fellow deportees. The title of the book can be interpreted ambiguously here; only the ashes of Elisabeth Wolf “return” or her return is from a place of ashes and death which haunts her in the textual present. The four months of her post-war life in Paris are presented as the end point in a slow and ineluctable process of a destruction begun elsewhere. Indeed the notion of the return itself is problematic within the exegesis of the novel. Elisabeth Wolf, the narrator, attempts on a number of occasions to return home in ways that would bridge her pre- and post-war lives. These range from the re-enactment of her return at the Gare de l’Est for the purposes of establishing her “fake” identity as Elisabeth Wolf, the returnee, to epistolary accounts, to imagined encounters between her real and impersonated self. None of these actual or fantasized occasions emerges to stand as the definite point of return. In its play of identities and allegiances, this fictional diary embodies the figurative impossibility of Elisabeth Wolf, the narrator, ever reintegrating into French society.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the crime fictions discussed here demonstrate French popular culture’s engagement with narratives of Jewish wartime experience. The conventions of crime fiction allow a “secret history” of Jewish persecution to emerge and for questions of guilt, responsibility and retribution to be aired. What characterizes all of the crime novels discussed here is the complex and monumentally traumatic process of disclosing wartime crimes against Jewish characters and the fatal

consequences this has for individuals, families and communities. The most disturbing aspect of such popular crime fictions is the recurrence of the figure of the Jewish collaborator, a figure who denounces other Jewish characters to the authorities and, in the three novels discussed here, expresses no change of heart, no remorse and little sense of guilt. How might we interpret these figures of Jewish culpability? Certainly, such literary representations could be said to confirm the existence of continuing post-war anti-Semitism. They might also be said to reflect the memory politics of the late 1950s and early 1960s, “transition” years in which war stories of French resistance heroism were in the ascendancy. “French” characters and “France” as a nation assume no guilt in these crime narratives. Instead, particularist interpretations of war crimes are evoked in which crimes against Jews are committed by Jews.

However, it might be equally instructive to focus on the notion of “family” crimes, crimes that take place within closed communities. For if representations of Jews in France can be read as a discursive screen onto which broader national debates are projected, these early crime narratives centred on Jewish communities could be said to stand in for the whole. They represent families (and a France) split asunder with internal conflict and strife and for whom there are no tidy endings and no neat resolutions. These texts enact not so much a forgetting as an implosion of wartime memory as “family” comes to replace “nation” as the privileged site of memory and as the symbol of collapse at war’s end. Memories of wartime Jewish persecution are firmly implanted in a fictional private realm but, as these popular novels suggest, they impinge on the wider community and a French readership obliged to consider their own guilt, shame or indifference.

By the 1980s and 1990s, the memory politics of the Second World War in France had shifted significantly with a younger generation of French crime writers ready to probe such “forgotten crimes.” Shifting the onus of guilt away from the Jewish community itself, novelists, such as Didier Daeninckx, Thierry Jonquet and Konop, investigated and implicated a far greater range of French actors and agents of persecution.<sup>45</sup> In so doing, they used the crime genre as a damning indictment of French state responsibility and culpability in the Holocaust, figured in real-life perpetrators such as Maurice Papon. Yet, as these richly evocative earlier novels suggest, wartime crimes against the Jewish community in France were never forgotten in popular culture and have been a constant feature of crime writing on the Second World War. Why, how and when they have been mobilized offers a powerful insight into the multiple legacies of war memories in France and their conflicted trajectories.



## NOTES

1. See Chapters 15, 16, 17 and 18 of *Investigating Identities: Questions of Identity in Contemporary International Crime Fiction*, ed. Marieke Krajenbrink and Kate M. Quinn (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2009).

2. This article forms part of a larger project on representations of the Second World War in French crime fiction. A paper based on this article was presented at the ‘Framing Narratives of the Second World War and the Occupation in France, 1939–2009’ conference in Leeds in September 2009 and I wish to thank Margaret Attack for her invitation to speak. Thanks also to Hanna Diamond for her insightful comments on an earlier draft of this article.

3. See Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Crises of Memory and the Second World War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 217–227.

4. *Ibid.*, 222.

5. See Henry Rousso, “Les refoulements (1954–1971),” in *Le Syndrome de Vichy: de 1944 à nos jours* (Paris: Seuil, 1991), 77–117, for a full exposition of memory debates within French public life during these decades.

6. See Robert Moeller, *War Stories: The Search for a Useable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), for an instructive study of West German war stories of the 1950s which provides an illuminating comparative frame of reference.

7. For a powerful and path-breaking investigation of the intersections of memories of the Holocaust and decolonization, see Michael Rothberg’s *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in an Age of Decolonization* (Palo Alto, California: Stanford University Press, 2009).

8. See Leah D. Hewitt, “Transitions Before the ‘Sorrow’: Criticism and Myth in the Late 1950s and Early 1960s,” in *Remembering the Occupation in French Film: National Identity in Postwar Europe* (Basingstoke: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2008), 35–64. 36, for a useful discussion of war memories in these years via the prism of film.

9. Pieter Lagrou, *The Legacy of Nazi Occupation: Patriotic Memory and National Recovery in Western Europe, 1945–1965* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 252.

10. Lagrou attributes the side-lining of Jewish war experiences to continuing post-war anti-Semitism and the perpetuation of racist stereotypes which propagated images of Jewish treason and the “lack” of a Jewish resistance. He also examines the prevalence of an anti-fascist discourse that grouped Jews with other victims of Nazi persecution and, lastly, he points to the impact of a dominant “patriotic” memory in France, that of the Resistance, that metaphorically “hid” Jewish survivors from view.

11. Annette Wiewiorka, “Jewish Identity in the First Accounts by Extermination Camp Survivors from France,” *Yale French Studies* 85 (1994): 135–151.

12. Hewitt, “Transitions,” 43.

13. Joan B. Wolf, *Harnessing the Holocaust: The Politics of Memory in France* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 14.

14. Nadine Rozenberg Akoun, “L’Image du juif dans le roman policier français au XXème siècle: évolution et permanence,” (PhD diss., Université Paris VIII, 2004).

15. André Hélène, *Les Clients du Central Hôtel* (Paris: Editions e-dite, 2000).

16. “Et il était juif. Cela ne l’avait pas empêché d’aller en classe avec les gosses de son quartier, d’apprendre rudiment à gagner son pain, de payer ses impôts comme tout le monde et de partir à la guerre, lorsque les autres étaient partis,” Hélène, 66. All translations from the French are my own unless otherwise specified.

17. "Maintenant, Blumenstein avait fait fortune," Hélène, 199.

18. "La Seconde Guerre mondiale ou la guerre d'Algérie laissent des séquelles dans les consciences des hommes comme dans leur cadre de vie [. . .]." Nadia Dhoukar, Preface to *Léo Malet: Nestor Burma, Les Nouveaux Mystères de Paris, volume II* (Paris: Editions Robert Laffont, 2006), ix–xlvi. xxxix–xl.

19. Karen Adler describes the rue des Rosiers as "the Jewish quarter not merely of Paris but it might be suggested of France itself" in *Jews and Gender in Liberation France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 146. The Sentier district is reputed for its clothing and footwear manufacture, one area of commercial activity closely associated with Jewish migrant communities.

20. The question of Burma's and, by implication, Malet's xenophobia and racism is addressed by Dhoukar in her preface to *Léo Malet: Nestor Burma, Les Nouveaux Mystères de Paris II*, xli–xlvi, and by Michelle Emanuel, *From Surrealism to Less-Exquisite Cadavers: Léo Malet and the Evolution of the French Roman Noir* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 90–95.

21. See *Du rébecca rue des Rosiers* in *Léo Malet: Nestor Burma, Les Nouveaux Mystères de Paris, Volume I*. All further references will be to this edition. Rachel Blum is referred to by Baget as "the yid" ("la youpine") (122). Faroux, the sympathetic police inspector when referring to Jewish names, comments "they are all called that in the tribe" ("ils s'appellent tous comme ça dans la tribu") (177) and a secondary Jewish character is described as follows: "he turned his doe eyes upon us with a nose that you only see in anti-Semitic caricatures" ("il lève sur nous des yeux de velours et un tarin comme on n'en voit que sur les caricatures anti-sémites") (163).

22. "On l'accuse d'avoir appartenu à une filiale de la Gestapo et de lui avoir même livré des juifs avec lesquels il était en différend. Et toutes ces félonies lui rapportent. C'est un collabo de l'espèce la plus basse. Pas par idéologie. Pour le flic," *Du rébecca rue des Rosiers*, 183.

23. The reference is made explicit on page 182. Joseph Joanovici was a well-known Jewish collaborator who supplied Germans with scrap metal as part of a market place of contacts between the German authorities and the Parisian underworld.

24. In *La Délation sous l'occupation* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1983), André Halimi provides a chilling account of the numbers of letters of denunciation sent by French people to various French and German authorities during the Occupation. He surmises that at least 3 million were received by the German Kommandatur alone, with the primary aim being denunciation of Jews. Yet, there is no mention in his study of Jewish auto-denunciation. This makes this repeated trope in French crime fiction of the 1950s and 1960s even more troubling and open to interpretation as a broader meditation on French attitudes to war guilt, crime and complicity.

25. "la maison en question est vraiment sinistre, vénéneuse au possible, surtout à cette heure crépusculaire et sous le méchant crachin qui tombe. Sa façade s'écaille. Elle a trois étages et toutes ses fenêtres sont murées. Un des battants du monumental portail de bois est couvert d'affiches, la plupart en hébreu, et d'inscriptions à la craie. Sur l'autre, est fixé un avertissement émaillé: DANGER," *Du rébecca rue des Rosiers*, 225.

26. "Les flics, maintenant, se détachent de la grille, démasquant un homme étendu par terre. Un homme vêtu d'un pardessus fripé, d'un costume fripé dont le visage n'a plus rien d'humain. Autour de ce cadavre, des pavés, des pierres énormes . . .," *Du rébecca rue des Rosiers*, 243–4.

27. See Joan B. Wolf, "Anne Frank is Dead, Long Live Anne Frank: the 6 Day War and the Origins of Holocaust Consciousness," *Harnessing the Holocaust*, 25–50, for an overview of the early memory politics of French Jewish responses to the Holocaust. Such narratives of Jewish redemption would largely be superseded by more overtly traumatic accounts of wartime loss in the aftermath of the 6-day war in 1967.

28. "Esther, rectifia-t-elle sèchement, Alice c'est un nom goy. Esther, ça, c'est du juif, du solide. Je suis une affreuse et ignoble juive. Si je n'avais pas été juive, rien de ce qui m'est arrivé ne me serait arrivé," *Des kilomètres de linceuls*, 256.

29. As Esther comments: "he is afflicted with an inferiority complex that he tries to overcome in one way or another. I suppose he brought that back from the concentration camp" ("il est plutôt affligé d'un complexe d'infériorité qu'il tente de combattre d'une manière ou d'une autre. Il a ramené ça du camp de concentration, je suppose . . ."), *Des kilomètres de linceuls*, 283.

30. "Il me faudrait me dépatouiller tout seul, et agir vite, avec des chances de réussir aussi maigres que si elles revenaient d'un camp de déportation, elles aussi," *Des kilomètres de linceuls*, 287.

31. "Tissus Berglevy. Cotonnades. Soieries. Lainages. Toiles. Des écrans de cinéma pour le rêve? Des draps de lit pour l'amour? Des linceuls, pas autre chose," *Des kilomètres de linceuls*, 353.

32. "[. . .] contredit l'hypothèse [. . .] selon lequel la période de l'après-guerre, les trente glorieuses, avait été un temps de déni et d'oubli des tragédies de l'occupation," Rozenberg Akoun, 112.

33. The novel was also later adapted for French television as *Le Retour d'Elisabeth Wolf* (1982), directed by Josée Dayan.

34. The quotation on the dust jacket for this edition reads: "a faint cold fear thrills through my veins," from *Romeo and Juliette*, Act IV, Scene III.

35. See Bryan Cheyette, "Introduction: Semitism and the Cultural Realm," in *Constructions of 'the Jew' in English Literature and Society: Racial Representations, 1875–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 1–12, for an illuminating discussion of issues of Jewish representation and cultural identity.

36. Hubert Monteilhet, *Return from the Ashes*, trans. Tony White (London: Panther Books Ltd., 1965), 29. All further quotations in the main body of this article will be taken from this translation. French quotations will refer to the edition of the text in the compendium, Hubert Monteilhet, *Omnibus* (Paris: Editions de Fallois, 1991): "une communauté de souffrance que le temps a cimentée," *Le Retour des cendres*, 141.

37. *Return from the Ashes*, 19. "J'avais un peu oublié que je l'étais. On me l'a rappelé très durement. Je dois tenir compte de ce rappel," *Le Retour des cendres*, 134.

38. A similar process of disavowal and disclosure of Jewish identity is highlighted in Francis Didelot's *Dernier Matin* (Paris: Fayard, 1959) as wartime and post-war denunciation and murder are revealed to be the result of the "hidden shame" of discovering a Jewish background.

39. *Return from the Ashes*, 28–9. "Le Juif, c'est une vue de l'esprit. On est israélite comme on est chrétien, on est juif comme on est français . . . C'est une affaire d'imagination," *Le Retour des cendres*, 141.

40. *Return from the Ashes*, 29. "Je crois en effet que tu souffres pour rien, reconnu-il tristement. Je sais que c'est très dur de souffrir ainsi, mais cela vaut mieux que de donner à ses ennuis un sens discutable. C'est plus digne," *Le Retour des cendres*, 142.

41. *Return from the Ashes*, 126. “J’ai pensé, d’autre part, qu’il était plus noble de confier ma femme à des soldats. Le crime laisse un goût d’autant moins amer que les complices honorables sont plus nombreux,” *Le Retour des cendres*, 219.

42. *Return from the Ashes*, 127. “il n’était pas facile, à l’époque, d’imaginer ce que pouvait bien être un camp de concentration dans un pays de dictature,” *Le Retour des cendres*, 219.

43. Tzvetan Todorov, *Facing the Extreme: Moral Life in the Concentration Camps* (New York: Henry Holt, 1996).

44. Adler, *Jews and Gender in Liberation France*, 154.

45. Didier Daeninckx, *Meurtres pour mémoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984); Thierry Jonquet, *Les Orpailleurs* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993); and Konop, *Pas de kaddish pour Sylberstein* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994).