Review

The Forgotten Rescue of French Jewry

Renee Poznanski
To Be a Jew in France During the Second World War, 1939-1945
Yad Vashem, 752 pages, Hebrew.

Reviewed by Yehoshua Porath

After decades of educational programs and visits to museums and memorial sites, Jews around the world have become well acquainted with the fate of European Jewry under Nazi occupation during the Second World War. Those non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews have been honored as "righteous gentiles," and some have even been the subject of books and films. Among European nations, it is the Danes, Bulgarians, and Dutch who are most remembered for their compassion toward the Jews during the Holocaust; in recent years, in light of the Balkan wars, a point has been made of the fact that the Serbs, too, came to the aid of their Jewish countrymen, in marked contrast to the Croats and Bosnians.

The story of how the majority of France's Jews were saved is not as well-known, however. Conventional wisdom sees the behavior of the French during the war as anything but praiseworthy. The actions of French citizens in general, and especially of the collaborationist regime in Vichy, are usually cast in unequivocal terms, as those of a people with little interest in either saving or murdering Jews, dedicated instead to protecting their own skins at the cost of hundreds of thousands of Jewish lives. Even those French historians who note that the Germans did not succeed in murdering all of their country's Jews tend to overestimate the death toll, putting it at between 40 and 50 percent of the total Jewish population.

Renee Poznanski's *To Be a Jew in France During the Second World War,*

1939-1945, a detailed study first published in French in 1994 and now appearing in Hebrew, sheds new light on the period. As her research demonstrates, fully 75 percent of France's Jews survived, a stunning anomaly among those countries that suffered German conquest—where, in most cases, occupation by the Nazis meant death for the great majority of a country's Jews. According to Poznanski, a professor of political science at Ben-Gurion University, the main reason for Germany's failure to destroy French Jewry was logistical, having to do with the unusual slowness with which the Germans established their rule and built the machinery of destruction. Yet the story told by Poznanski, depicting Jewish life in France at the time, the rescue efforts, and the high survival rate, points to other causes which may have contributed, even decisively, to the survival of France's Jews—causes which, if fully understood, may fundamentally alter the way we look at French behavior during the Holocaust.

The story of French Jewry during World War II begins with France's sudden transformation, in the summer of 1940, from an independent, democratic state to a country occupied by the totalitarian Nazi regime. The collapse of France's military over a six-week period, from May 10 to June 17, shocked the nation. The French army, which until recently had been considered by many to be the strongest in Europe, collapsed so rapidly that it caused the great majority of the ruling elite, as well as the French public, to lose their will to fight. As a result, they were only too happy to pin their hopes, almost mystically, on a father figure: The World War I legend, Marshal Philippe Petain, the hero of Verdun.

Since joining Paul Reynaud's government as vice-premier, Petain had campaigned for an end to French resistance against the Germans. With the resignation on June 16, 1940 of Reynaud, who had been among the few who wanted to continue the war, Petain—now prime minister—sued for an armistice, and brought an end to France's participation in the war even before official talks with Germany had begun. The great majority of the French people and its elected representatives supported this decision.

On July 10, the French National Assembly handed over to Petain full legislative and executive power, and he set about refashioning France in the spirit of the times, purging it of Enlightenment and Revolutionary sentiment, and particularly of what was left of its liberal, socialist, democratic, or universalist past. Only eighty out of nearly seven hundred members of the Chamber of Deputies and the

Senate—which together constitute the National Assembly—dared vote against this constitutional revolution; among them were 36 Socialists, as well as some radicals, centrists, and members of the moderate Right. (The Communist Party had already been outlawed and its members ousted from the National Assembly at the end of September 1939, due to its opposition to the war and its support for the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact.)

The armistice dictated by the Germans was relatively tolerable, under the circumstances. It forbade France from maintaining a substantial military force (over one hundred thousand soldiers), placed the northern and western parts of the country under German military administration, and compelled the French to pay an exorbitant tribute. At the same time, however, it permitted the French government to continue ruling in the remainder of the country, recognized French sovereignty over the entire national territory, and even refrained from making any determination concerning the future of Alsace-Lorraine, an area that had been disputed by the two countries for some seventy years.

This is a rare case in the annals of Adolf Hitler's actions in which we have explicit testimony by the Nazi dictator himself concerning his motives, thanks to conversations he conducted with Italian ruler Benito Mussolini while the armistice talks with France were going on; transcripts of these conversations were preserved in the Italian state archives and later published. Hitler explained to his fellow dictator how important it was to him that France, with its substantial navy and vast territorial possessions, lay down its arms. The French themselves, if given limited self-governing authority, would do the dirty work of controlling their public, while the highly efficient French administration would implement Germany's policy of wringing France's economy dry to support the Nazi war effort. Germany's position, based on these calculations, accorded the French government, now seated in Vichy, considerable freedom of action.

Petain and his government were, apparently, unaware of Hitler's motives. They acted on the assumption that the war would end within a few weeks, with a German victory over Great Britain. Their interests, therefore, seemed to lie with a policy of close economic and political collaboration with a victorious Germany, through which they might attain favorable terms in any peace treaty that would, in due course, be signed.

In order to curry favor with the Germans, the Vichy government adopted a policy of persecution towards the Jews. The base of Vichy's support consisted of old-fashioned

anti-Semites, members of the various movements of the radical Right, Catholic conservatives, and other opponents of Enlightenment traditions; a large segment of the bourgeois Right recalled with bitterness the Popular Front government of 1936-1938, headed by Leon Blum, a Jewish socialist who even became a Zionist, and they saw Vichy as an effective rejoinder to the policies and legislation of the Left.

While neither Petain nor his vice-premier, Pierre Laval—an outspoken advocate of collaboration with Germany—possessed an anti-Semitic past, they still had no qualms about enacting anti-Jewish legislation, backed by the support of this coalition. The new laws were first passed in the summer of 1940 and quickly led to the expulsion of Jews from the political, cultural, scientific, and legal centers of the country. Jews were ordered to register with the Interior Ministry, and their property was confiscated. The Vichy government made a point of keeping the spoils for themselves, arguing that it would be better for this property to be administered by Frenchmen, so that it would remain as part of the nation's assets. In establishing a racial definition of the Jews, the Vichy government acted independently of the Germans, but in the end differed little from them, crafting their own theory of Jewish identity based on blood. If there was a time when French apologists were able to lay the blame for these policies on German pressure, the publication of research by Eberhard Jaeckel in 1966 and by Robert Paxton and Michael Marrus in the early 1980s long ago laid such claims to rest.

As the Nazis' policies towards the Jews of France harshened, and their intentions became increasingly clear, a tangible rift emerged between the Germans and the French. When, in June 1942, the Germans dictated that all Jews must don a yellow star, the measure was opposed by the Vichy government, which acted with the widespread support of the French public, and the French authorities succeeded in preventing its implementation throughout unoccupied France. Henri Michel, the leading historian of wartime France, writes in his book *Resistant Paris* of Frenchmen in Paris who ridiculed the Nazi policies by hanging yellow badges around their dogs' necks, emblazoned with the word "goy."

Roundups of Jews in preparation for transport to the death camps in Poland aroused feelings of revulsion in the French public, and led to empathy with the Jews and even a feeling of solidarity with them—which in turn brought about the first significant breach in the support enjoyed by the

Vichy government, in the spring and summer of 1942. At that time, the bishop of Toulouse, Monseigneur Saliege, issued a diocesan letter denouncing the deportations and calling upon believing Catholics to come to the Jews' aid. Other bishops, such as Pierre Gerlier of Lyons, who was an enthusiastic supporter of Vichy policies, expressed similar sentiments, though less forcefully. It should be noted that neither Saliege nor the other bishops and archbishops opposed the Vichy regime, and they saw it as the legitimate government of France. (Saliege was later honored by Yad Vashem, Israel's official Holocaust museum, which declared him a "righteous gentile" and planted a tree in his memory at the Avenue of the Righteous among the Nations, even though he was not among the opponents of Vichy.) And as criticism of the Nazis and of Vichy's collaboration with them grew, so did the willingness among the French to help the Jews.

The Vichy government opposed the arrest and deportation by the Germans of Jews who held French citizenship. At the same time, Jews in France who were not citizens, numbering about 150,000, were left to the mercy of the Nazis; the job of arresting them and handing them over to the Nazis was given to the Vichy police. The Nazis, for their part, pressed for the wholesale cancellation of French citizenship for all Jews, which would have made it possible to deport them en masse to the death camps—but the Vichy government forcefully rejected this demand. Among opponents of this demand was Pierre Laval, who rebuffed pressure from Germany, and from anti-Semites within the French government and the circles of collaborators. The most Laval was willing to do was to set up a committee that would examine all the cases of naturalization of foreigners (not only Jews) that had been approved since the passage of a liberal naturalization law in 1927, and determine whether there were people who had been granted citizenship improperly. Of the twenty thousand cases that were reviewed, three thousand Jews were found to have been improperly naturalized; they lost their citizenship and were left to the bitter fate that awaited the deportees.

Even after the German army marched into the previously unoccupied zone in November 1942, in response to the invasion by the western Allies of Morocco and Algeria, the Vichy government maintained some independence in its policy concerning the Jews, and continued its opposition to the yellow star and the deportation of Jewish citizens. Even with all of France under occupation, Germany continued declaring itself to be bound by the armistice agreement, and

therefore continued to relate to the Vichy government as the official representative of a sovereign France. The Nazis were not interested in driving Petain and his followers to all-out opposition to the occupation, or in precipitating Petain's flight to North Africa. Thus, even at this juncture, they did not ignore the positions of the Vichy authorities, and certainly did not institute the kind of regime that they imposed in other occupied countries, particularly in Eastern Europe.

The Jews' response to what was taking place around them varied widely. It should be recalled that fully half of the 300,000 Jewish residents of prewar France were noncitizens. For the most part, these were immigrants from Eastern Europe and refugees from the conquered lands of the Third Reich; in addition to their lingual and cultural diversity, these Jews were involved in a wide range of professional occupations, and bore diverse political and religious affiliations. Nor was French Jewry itself homogeneous. It included fully assimilated Jews whose Jewish origin was not known to anyone, as well as proud Jews who made no secret of their heritage.

Of the assimilated Jews, most of whom had been firmly rooted in French life for generations, some ignored the order to register as Jews, continued to live and act as Frenchmen, and in some cases even succeeded in holding on to their government posts. Others supported the Jewish mutual-aid organizations and extended a hand to foreign Jews in their midst. Such support agencies enjoyed the aegis of the French Communist Party, the Bund, and the Zionists, organized financial assistance, found housing for homeless deportees, and provided health services. Poznanski describes a meeting of Jewish volunteers that took place in Paris on June 15, 1940:

> Those members of the French Federation of Jewish Societies who had not left Paris convened in order to decide what steps should be taken. Most were well-known political activists who had gained renown before the war in the movements of the Jewish-Zionist Left (Poalei Tzion and Hashomer Hatza'ir) and the non-Zionist Left (the Bund). Cooperation in the area of welfare was understood as a direct continuation of the work that had been done earlier by the social-aid organization founded by Jewish immigrants in 1939… but now they wasted no time in extending their activity to all areas of welfare assistance.

These volunteers, who united as the Amelot Committee, "set up and ran… four soup kitchens that served an average of 1,500 meals daily…. More than a third of the meals were distributed for free…. Health services

included free clinic visits…, distribution of medicine, and the creation of a center for the distribution of clothing." Perhaps most importantly, they also smuggled Jews to the unoccupied south and published underground periodicals which served as a source of information and encouragement for many Jews.

Poznanski depicts such heroic actions of organizations and individuals in detail, with compassion and understanding. In researching *To Be a Jew in France*, Poznanski left no stone unturned, poring through government and personal archives, memoirs, personal diaries, and oral testimonies, in order to present a panoramic view of the daily trials of the Jews of France, and of the ways in which they grappled with their predicament. In this history, it is not the substantial role played by Jews in the French Resistance movements that takes center stage, but rather the "history of everyday life" that is currently popular among historians studying Central and Western Europe under Nazi occupation. Poznanski offers numerous detailed accounts of Jews who were suddenly stripped of their livelihood, security, and rights as Frenchmen, in the very country that had been the first to grant its Jews emancipation a century and a half earlier. Jewish merchants whose businesses were banned were suddenly left without an income at a time of increasing unemployment, and were forced to earn their living through whatever backbreaking manual labor they could find. Civil servants, judges, and lecturers who had lost their jobs tried to make do by teaching privately or in schools, or by finding a new profession. The many others who simply could not find a means of support were able to avoid starvation through the assistance of the local community's mutual-aid organizations or those of the Zionists, Communists, or Bundists.

Particularly moving are the excerpts from the letters to Petain and his government by members of the veteran assimilated families, in which they related the history of their families' integration into French life, and their ancestors' contribution to France's defense dating from the Napoleonic wars to the present. As Poznanski concludes:

> The fate of most of the Jews resembled that of George Ascoli, a professor at the Sorbonne who won five medals in World War I, commanded a battalion in 1940, and was a prisoner of war in Nazi Germany. Upon his return to Paris, however, he learned that he had been relieved of all his duties…. or like Antoine Sciama, a student in the Polytechnic School whose grandfather had participated in the construction of the Suez Canal and whose great-grandfather,

who had fought in Napoleon's army, lost his leg to frostbite in the battle of Berezina—but none of this mattered when, upon completing his studies, he was not accepted for any position at all.

There were even some Jews who despaired of receiving special permission to continue in their positions in the civil service or the universities (such permission was given, for example, to the renowned historian Marc Bloch), and angrily returned to Petain the medals they or their fathers had earned for valor in defense of the French homeland.

In the last part of the book, Poznanski tackles the question of how it came about that three-quarters of the Jews who lived in France during the war survived the Nazi onslaught. Of the country's 300,000 Jews, only about 75,000 were sent to the death camps; of these deportees, about 50,000 were foreign nationals. In other words, even among the 150,000 Jewish non-citizens in France, whom the Nazis were free to hunt at will, about two-thirds survived.

Poznanski attributes the survival of the majority of French Jewry to the slowness with which the Germans implemented their genocidal policies; the paucity of resources they dedicated to the transport of Jews to Eastern Europe; the ability of the Jews, prior to November 1942, to flee to the unoccupied south; the possibility of escaping after November 1942 to the part of the country in the southeast that was controlled by the Italians, who not only did not share the Nazis' murderous designs but even protected the Jews; and the passive resistance of the majority of Frenchmen to the Nazi policy of deportation and murder. This opposition intensified after the occupation of the south in November 1942, and after the imposition in February 1943 of mandatory registration for labor in Germany. Basing herself mostly on the conclusions of earlier scholars, Poznanski argues that if France had not been liberated between June and November of 1944, the Germans would have succeeded in making up for lost time in deporting France's Jews. "The process of destruction was cut short by the liberation of territories by the Allies," she writes. "Had that happened several months later, the results might have been completely different."

This account, even though all its elements are true, falls short. It does not explain, for example, why the Germans took so long in implementing their murderous policies in France, and why they allocated so few resources for the transports in comparison with, say, Holland—where the Nazis succeeded in killing no fewer than 85 percent of the country's Jews.

Moreover, Poznanski's explanation glosses over the specific question of the Jewish foreign nationals. These Jews were utterly abandoned by the Vichy authorities, and the government's security apparatus (the police and, especially, the *milice*) were supposed to spare no expense in capturing Jewish non-citizens and handing them over to the Nazis.

A better explanation may be found if we take a look at the extensive scholarly literature that has appeared in recent years concerning the functioning of Petain's government, and in particular the question of whether his course of action was justified. These works teach that many Frenchmen did not fully carry out the orders they were given concerning the Jews, and even ignored them or followed them for the sake of appearance alone after having warned the Jews of what awaited them. And there were others who simply played both sides during the entire Vichy period, acting alternately as loyal officials and as supporters of the French Resistance, Spanish refugees, anti-Nazi Germans, and persecuted Jews. Even the French war hero Jean Moulin played this sort of dual role during the first year of the Vichy regime, and continued to serve as a regional prefect. Only later did he leave his position, join de Gaulle's liberation movement in London, and then return to southern France in order to establish the National Council of the Resistance; there he remained until the Nazis captured him and tortured him to death in June 1943.

The active role played by the French in thwarting German intentions to annihilate the Jews was amply illustrated in one of the largest rescue operations undertaken during the entire war: The smuggling of about ten thousand Jewish children from the occupied north to villages in the unoccupied south. The operation's success required substantial organization by the Jews, extensive aid from the French resistance movements, and, above all, thousands of families of French farmers who were willing to provide refuge for these children along the way. Had all these factors not been in place, the children would not, in all likelihood, have been saved.

A further example of French efforts on behalf of the Jews is the behavior of the Paris police during the massive roundup of Jewish non-citizens on the night of July 16, 1942. The French police, aided by volunteers from the ranks of the French Nazi organizations, surrounded the Jewish neighborhoods and sought to carry out arrests according to detailed registration lists of Jewish foreign nationals. Yet the French police succeeded in arresting only about half the people on the lists—thanks to sympathizers at the Paris police headquarters who tipped

off the Jews and thereby enabled those who were capable of escaping to do so in advance of the roundup, to make it to hiding places, and from there to go on to the unoccupied south.

The dual character of the Paris police was also expressed in its struggle against the French underground organizations. The police employed two main divisions in its search for Jews and Resistance members: The general intelligence service and the Special Brigades. Agents of the former were none too enthusiastic about carrying out their orders, and many of them actively aided the underground or were even members of its organizations; the tip-offs to Jews usually came from their ranks. The members of the Special Brigades, on the other hand, usually supported collaboration with the Germans and were far more diligent in their efforts to capture Resistance members and Jews.

Poznanski is correct in positing that these cases reflect more on French society as a whole than on the French government at Vichy. But is it conceivable that the prefects and subprefects, under whose command the police officers, detectives, and informers everywhere served, were unaware of what was going on? Initial studies based on the archives of the prefects and subprefects show that many of them indeed knew. They generally turned a blind eye for various reasons: Some as part of the French national resistance effort to the Nazis and their actions, others out of compassion for the Jews, and still others out of a cynical desire to hedge their bets by ensuring that they would be remembered for their righteous conduct in the reckoning that would take place after the liberation.

Beyond the ambivalent relations of the non-Jewish citizens of France and of the French government towards the Jews, an additional factor also contributed to their rescue, one that was an inherent part of German policy on the administration of France. German rule in France did not resemble German rule in Poland. Giving assistance to Jews or fomenting labor unrest—such as the coal miners' strike in the occupied north in May 1941—was not automatically punished by death. In France it was possible to bring production to a halt in a segment of the economy essential to the German war effort, such as the coal industry, to take part in rescue operations, or to flout the conqueror's honor by hanging a yellow star on the collars of dogs, without being executed on the spot or sent to the concentration camps. In many instances, such "criminals" were tried and punished by the French courts of Vichy, but the sentences that were imposed were not unbearably harsh. In other words, the

singular nature of German rule in France, which so differed from the character of Nazi occupation in most other countries, should be added to the list of factors that facilitated the rescue of the majority of French Jewry. Poznanski, however, does not give it the weight it deserves.

More striking in its absence from the book, however, is any discussion of the objective, if unintentional, role of buffer that the Vichy government played between the German occupier and the Jews. It is commonly held, for example, that the collaboration of King Boris of Bulgaria with the Germans staved off direct occupation and enabled the rescue of the majority of that country's Jews. Denmark is praised for the protection of its Jews, but this too was due in no small measure to the fact that the Danish government operated under the aegis of a German protectorate, and was itself the product of a certain measure of collaboration with Germany. This is true as well with respect to the quasi-fascists Miklosh Horthy and Ion Antonescu in Hungary and Romania. The majority of Romania's Jews survived because they were not under direct German rule, even if they did suffer brutal treatment at the hands of the anti-Semitic Romanian government. In Hungary, Horthy limited himself to practicing various forms of discrimination against the Jews and to limiting their freedoms, whereas the large-scale murder began only in the spring of 1944, when the Germans occupied Hungary, installed a government of direct occupation, and began the accelerated deportation of its Jews to Auschwitz. The fact that half of Hungary's Jews survived is a direct result of the delay in the start of the mass-murder operation, coupled with the fact that in August of that year, the Germans had to stop it, as the Red Army stood at the gates of Hungary, and the German military was forced to evacuate.

Bearing in mind the limitations of such a parallel, and taking into account the sensitivity required by anyone making this sort of claim, it is nevertheless reasonable to conclude that what has often been said of Jewish survival in Denmark, Hungary, and Romania before the occupation of these countries is also true, to a certain degree, of French Jewry. Clearly such a conclusion should never be voiced without due consideration of its implications, and it is of utmost importance that my words be understood in context. I am keenly aware that from the standpoint of French national honor and the rehabilitation of the country, and especially from the overall perspective of the war against Nazi Germany, right was on the side of de Gaulle and not Petain. The continuation of the war in June

1940 by France, based in its empire in northern and central Africa, and the dedication of the French navy, second in size only to Great Britain's, would have contributed greatly to the British war effort. It should not be forgotten that during the heroic, perilous year between June 1940 and the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, and even until the declaration of war by Germany against the United States in December 1941, Britain stood alone against the Germans. The French navy, rather than being destroyed by the British in Algeria in July 1940, or remaining idly at anchor in the port of Toulon under the terms of the armistice agreement, could have supported the British navy in the immensely important task of defending the British isles and guarding the crucial supply routes from the United States across the Atlantic. The decision by Petain to stop hostilities and accept an armistice, a decision that enjoyed the support of the decisive majority of the French people and its elites, was nothing short of disgraceful. The impact of de Gaulle's heroic behavior, on the other hand, is still felt throughout the world. But from the narrow vantage of the Jews in France under the German occupation, the situation in France was (one shudders in writing these words) a relatively positive one. The most reasonable alternative to Vichy under the circumstances would have been a French version of the General Government in Poland. It is not hard to imagine what the fate of French Jewry would have been.

To Be a Jew in France During the Second World War is a sensitive, thorough presentation of the complexity of Jewish survival in France during that country's darkest hour. Renee Poznanski's detailed account raises crucial questions, and although not all her answers are compelling, the book is nonetheless absorbing and well-grounded, thought-provoking and filled with unconventional conclusions.

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