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FINDING SARAH KOFMAN: VEFIFYING HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY AND THE PERILS OF MEANING

What does it mean to verify a holocaust survivor's testimony? Do the details of one life lived in the midst of so many millions who perished matter? Is it moral to wonder such things?

Sarah Kofman was a French philosopher, writer, and art historian whose father was murdered in Auschwitz. During the French Occupation Kofman spent about a year and a half of her childhood hiding in a neighbour's house disguised as the woman's daughter. In 1987 she nominated Claire Chemitre, the woman who had hidden her and her mother, to be counted among "the Righteous among the Nations". A couple of years later Kofman finished her autobiography *Rue Ordener, rue Labat* in which she recounted a much larger story about her family's loss and about her survival. She narrated significant events, and much of what she wrote informed the citation that named Chemitre as one of the "Righteous among the Nations."

In the practice of history one tends to distrust what people remember, and so we, here writing this paper, set out to verify Kofman's autobiography by using various archival and newspaper sources to establish the veracity of her recollections in both her autobiography and in the nomination she wrote on behalf of Chemitre's citation. As the research progressed, however, we began to be troubled by interrogating such a record and wondered about the moral implications of such criticism. In the end, we discovered substantial differences between the nomination and the autobiography as well as inaccuracies in Chemitre's Yad Vashem citation. We were also able to expose portions of the world of Occupied Paris that Kofman had only cursorily revealed. However, as we pursued our task, we had to ask ourselves—Does a survivor's testimony have to be accurate to be true? In other words, we began to wonder whether or not narrative practice can do justice to experiences such as Kofman's and, if not, how we might best endeavour to approach them? Or are they best left alone?

The Yad Vashem holocaust memorial in Jerusalem honours men and women who helped to save Jewish people during World War II as "Righteous among the Nations." Among the long list of names is Claire Chemitre who entered the rolls of the righteous in 1989, two years after Kofman had nominated her. Yad Vashem expects

nominations to fit certain criteria, namely that the nominee had saved a Jewish life, that they had risked their own life in so doing, and that they had received no financial compensation for their deed. Kofman's nomination of Chemitre hewed closely to the formula and leaves us with a spare story about selflessness and courage: Chemitre came in the night during a raid, rescued Kofman and her mother, hid them in her apartment for the duration of the war, and saved their lives for no compensation.

But such narratives are never neutral. Seven years after Kofman submitted the nomination, she completed her autobiography *Rue Ordener, rue Labat* in which she amplified, contradicted, and complicated the history she had written in the nomination. Let us mention two examples. First, in the autobiography Kofman recounts that a man, not Chemitre, warned them of the raid and that they then fled to Chemitre's apartment who, reluctantly, eventually allowed them to stay with her after several unsuccessful attempts to send the young Sarah to a shelter for Jewish children. The second and more perplexing incongruity lies in the troubled and sometimes anti-semitic portrayal of Chemitre provided by Kofman that complicates what had been a straightforward story about simple selflessness and courage. Indeed, as Kofman related her experience in hiding it becomes clear that Chemitre may have had other interests at heart that simply coincided with heroically hiding a wanted child. First, Chemitre renamed Sarah Suzanne to hide her origins and insisted that Suzanne call her Mémé – an affectionate familial term in French. At first, Sarah lived in the bedroom to which she and her mother were confined but, as time passed, Chemitre, who decided that Suzanne was becoming pale and sickly, began at some point taking Suzanne out for walks and to do the shopping. From this point on, Chemitre kept Kofman in separate living quarters from her mother, changed her hair and her clothing and began to feed her forbidden and unclean foods all while Kofman's mother worried, for good reason it turned out, that she was losing her daughter. As Kofman remembered, Chemitre had taught her to be ashamed of her so-called "Jewish nose," that Jews had killed the Lord Jesus Christ, and that while Jews could be adept at music and philosophy, they were also stingy and crafty. Mémé's mothering, Kofman recalled, broke her relationship with her mother and undermined her ties to the faith her murdered father had taught. The young Sarah, whose mother used to dry and boil salted beef, could now no longer pronounce a word in Yiddish, ate raw horsemeat and pork, craved "rare steak cooked in butter and parsley" and, as Kofman details in her account, dreaded the end of the war when she would have to return to live with her mother[1]. Such were the costs of learning what Chemitre called a new and proper way of life.

Is one story true and the other false? Maybe. Does it in truth matter or make a difference?

Two distinct madnesses derive from undertaking research into such questions. The first involves the simple search for veracity. When Kofman mentions taking piano lessons on Rue de la Chapelle, who was her teacher? When she went to school on rue Doudeauville, what was the school's address? We found these things. When she says there was a restaurant below her apartment's balcony or that she bought milk around the corner, we found them. But we could not find the fortune teller she and her mother consulted on Rue des Charbonniers to learn of her father's fate in Auschwitz nor could we locate the Adlers who lived on Rue Simart whose daughter, before she was seized and deported, was a close friend of Kofman's and whose son Oskar studied philosophy with her after the war at the Sorbonne. We also located the small synagogue on the Rue Duc in the 18th arrondissement where Kofman's father had been a rabbi, but found no record to confirm that Hélène Goldenberg, Kofman's classmate, had been deported as part of the roundup at the Vel d'Hiv' in October 1943.

Not long into our searches through census records and catalogues that registered the city's businesses we began to wonder what was the point? While we had buttressed what one might call the "factuality" of Kofman's autobiography and refined the level of detail, we had ultimately also added nothing. But what we had found was a gap that separated the salvation narrative Kofman had written to nominate Chemitre as "Righteous" and the more ambiguous account around which her autobiography orbits. Still, in the end, the same people survived and the same people were killed. The same trains pulled the same cars east and the same Shoah happened. You feel hapless in the face of such questions and answers.

And you feel hapless in the face of such sources. Stepping into the documentation of the Shoah left us feeling stained, as it should, because to roll through dozens of microfilm reels to read the details that fill the thousands of arrest documents for people doomed to die—names, birthdates, birthplaces, wounds suffered in the first world war, profession, ration cards held, and other infirmities—is to confront what happened one person at a time and to see the apparatus of death at its most banal levels; to witness the gratuitous hatred with which neighbours anonymously denounced neighbours for being Jewish or not wearing the yellow star in the innumerable handwritten missives received and diligently catalogued by Police; to witness how someone decided to have stamps made that read "interné a Drancy" while someone else invented the shorthand "TAA"—transporté a Auschwitz—to save time in busy offices.

A sense of shame creeps in when you realize that you have just gotten hungry but you promise yourself to push on through a few dozen more files before stepping out of the archives for a falafel and fresh lemonade. You feel

somehow complicit in it all because in viewing the records you have given new life to the events they document, a second breath to the apparatus the police and thousands of Parisians put in place to murder tens of thousands of men, women, and children. But then you reach Rue des Rosiers that was the commercial centre of a large Jewish community then, you duck the pigeons and dodge the tourists, windowshop the upscale boutiques, and wonder about the men you see in black broad-brimmed hats. In short, you find yourself in the world of the living where you belong and, like everyone else around you, you forget the past inscribed in the very pavement on which you tread. And then you have to return to the microfilm and cannot help but also feel ashamed to have left those people for an hour and to wonder what on earth is anyone going to learn from your work that they do not already know.

In an article she started but never finished, Kofman writes about Rembrandt's famous painting the "Anatomy Lesson" and draws our attention to the fact that the physicians depicted in the painting show no regard for the individual who, having lost his life not long before, lies beside a book naked on a table in front of them. As she explains, they are on the side of life. They are focused on the knowledge they can draw from comparing the book and the lifeless cadaver whose name and past are of no consequence to them. As she further explains, their knowledge distracts them from what they do not want to see, from what they cannot afford to see, precisely because they are in the world of the living where they belong—their knowledge distracts them from the fact that the man lying before them is what they too will one day become, is that which they are, at that very moment, already in the process of becoming—dead.

Kofman was not unaware of the power of distraction inherent to the pursuit of knowledge. In *Rue Ordener, rue Labat*, she explains how, in her first book, she had commented on the relationship between Leonardo da Vinci's portrayal of the *Madonna and Child with St. Anne* and the ambiguous and contradictory nature of his feelings toward his mother and step mother. In retrospect, this early work, on whose cover is featured da Vinci's depiction of the two women and child, seems to have facilitated the illusion of mastering what could not be mastered: Kofman's own complicated history with Mémé and her mother. A strategy that enabled her to forget what she needed to forget in order to remain among the living.

As Kofman asks, on the one hand how does one speak about the Shoah? On the other, how can one renounce doing so given that those who survived had but one wish to tell of their experience, and to do so endlessly, because those who did not survive could not. And yet, when the only language we have at our disposal is the same language that articulated the Final Solution from conception to execution, where do we turn? Think about it. In North

America at least, race remains a fundamental way to divide and describe people. Today, rightly or wrongly, we still talk about Jews and, when we do, we agree with the past that, yes, there are millions of individuals who can be glossed as Jews. The structures that language lent to the Shoah, whether German, French, Yiddish, or English, exist still and exert what Kofman called a kind of "sovereignty" over how we can narrate that part of the past.

If knowledge and narrative carry the potential that enabled the Shoah to become a reality, how then do we continue to pursue what we do without perpetuating or realizing this potential? There is likely no true answer to the question and we are by no means trying to suggest that we should all stop doing research, stop telling stories, and stop communicating altogether. However, we do, like Kofman, recognize that the use of language and, in particular, narrative, renders us complicit in the strain of life to which the Shoah belongs. A case in point, Yad Vashem's template to which Kofman's nomination of Chemitre needed to conform.

In a short passage at the beginning of Kofman's autobiography, she describes the taped up fountain pen that once belonged to her father, the only object of his that she possesses, and which compels her to write. She concludes the passage by suggesting that the many books she wrote in her academic career may have constituted the necessary and preliminary steps that enabled her to write what she called "this," an ambiguous reference to the anecdote about her father's pen and to her life's story recorded in *Rue Ordener, rue Labat*. Knowledge and narrative enabled her to develop a career, to eventually become a professor and a philosopher, and to make a name for herself in the Sorbonne's rare air.

But they were also the means that enabled her to leave the past behind. As she explains in *Rue Ordener, rue Labat*, when she began studying philosophy at the Sorbonne, she could no longer bear to visit Mémé whom she had continued to visit regularly throughout her life after the war. In a sense, after the war, knowledge and narrative came to take the place of Mémé whose role previously had been to turn Kofman away from the difficult reality of her father's death and of her mother's pain. Because, as she states in *Rue Ordener, rue Labat*, Mémé, after the war, could only speak of the past, Kofman eventually also needed to turn away from her. But in the end Kofman came to see that just as she had devoted her academic life to exposing the intellectual inconsistencies and human frailties of various important philosophical and artistic works so too had she evaded her own life's truth through her practice. And so, when in *Rue Ordener, rue Labat*, she says that her past writings were only preliminary steps to writing what she called "this", she finally was able to name the thing that had been waiting to be acknowledged for so long. And then she killed herself.

It's been said that "Our lives teach us who we are"[2]. The relationship between Kofman's long walk from *Rue Ordener rue Labat* to suicide cannot be known but, among the many possibilities, we can ask what narrative and knowledge offer in the face of life and in constructing our many different pasts. In her case it seems that knowledge and narrative worked to postpone her confrontation with, in the end, the "this" about which she finally wrote. Did her intellectual life substitute an illusory comfort to cover the fact that she too was a victim of the Shoah even though her death will never be added to the dead's final tally. Or did it allow her to talk about it only after an appropriate interval of time? Maybe, even probably, the weight of her past was too much to bear but her struggle at least can cause us to question not the details of her story but the foundational structures of her life and the means we have to talk about them.

Can we still talk of Jews without reproducing the core logic that lead to the awful events that ended her life? Can we say the Shoah has even ended so long as its horrors continue to ripple through peoples' lives and the places where we live? And if Kofman could not ever really come to terms with the damage the Shoah caused in her relationship to her mother and to Claire Chemitre, how can we be sure that the society that enabled her father's murder, her eventual suicide, and tens of thousands of other knowable deaths has made its proper peace? And how many books or articles or documentaries do we need to remember what we need to remember, to stop the madness we proclaim to want to stop, or to know that our place is to struggle on the side of life and to not give in to death?

Our search to verify the many daily details of Kofman's autobiography feels in some ways like a dead end because nothing we can do can alter the basic truth of what she wrote but, at the same time, while we have our doubts about the importance of scholarship to real life, it was the search, not the finding, that brought us to the questions we have raised here.

End Notes

[1] Sarah Kofman, *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat*. Trans. Ann Smock. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), p. 57.
[2] Salman Rushdie, "In Good Faith", *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, 1981-1991* (London, Granta Books, 1998), 393-414.