

At the Crossroads of Life and Death: The Migration of Memories in Holocaust-era France from the Past to the Present

A Tribute to Holocaust Survivor Annette Muller (1933– 2021)



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Introduction

The overarching objective of this project is to explore the various nuances of the theme of migration during Holocaust-era France. More specifically, this project aims to investigate the connection between physical migration and the migration of memories. Railways and crossroads, both physical and metaphorical, will serve as a guiding principle in the undertaking of this research project, given their pertinence to migration and deep-rooted entanglement with the dark realities of the Holocaust. The specific objectives of the proposed project are three-fold. Using virtual audiovisual survivor testimonies provided by the family of Annette Muller, and autobiographical survivor memoirs, including Annette Muller's *La Petite Fille du Vel d'Hiv*, this project seeks to analyze the various routes of physical migration of Jews deported from France during the Holocaust, the migration of memories accompanying these deportations, and the restitching of memories in the post-war era.

Historical Context

At the onset of the German Occupation of France in June 1940, the Jewish population in Metropolitan France was composed of approximately 330,000 individuals. Two distinct groups comprised this population; 200,000 individuals were French citizens, while the remaining 130,000 were foreigners fleeing their home countries already invaded by the Nazis. Of the 200,000 Jews holding French citizenship, half had been residing in France for multiple generations. The other half included naturalized immigrants and their native-born children. While France represents one of countries with the highest survival rates of Jews during the Holocaust, it is nonetheless important to remember the lives of the nearly 74,000 individuals who were deported to concentration camps and murdered as a direct result of the collaboration of France's Vichy government with the Nazi regime.

Significance

Over the course of history, French society's perspective towards Holocaust survivors' testimonies has evolved. It was only in 1995 that French President Jacques Chirac acknowledged France's responsibility in the deportation of Jews to concentration camps during the Holocaust. Nevertheless, a 2020 study revealed that 25% of French millennials surveyed had never heard of the Holocaust. Another 2020 study revealed that 63% of Americans aged 18-39 surveyed did not know that 6 million Jews were murdered in the Holocaust. Now more than ever, it is critical that we shed light on the significance of first-person accounts of the Holocaust and ensure that they are being transmitted to future generations.

The Life of Annette Muller

Pre-War (1933-1939)

- Born in Paris on March 15, 1933 in Ménilmontant neighborhood in 20th arrondissement
- Parents immigrated from Poland to France around 1929-1930, lived modestly
- Religious Jewish family, spoke Yiddish at home
- Well-integrated with other French schoolchildren, regardless of their religion
- First memory of war was in September 1939 (age 6)

« Et je me souviens de l'inquiétude qui commence à se développer parce qu'on parle beaucoup des Juifs. Et à partir de ce moment-là, je sens que le mot juif est menaçant parce que ça chuchote autour de nous, on parle de ce problème-là avec des mots couverts, on sent qu'il y a quelque chose d'oppressant, d'inquiétant. »

"And I remember the anxiety that began to develop because there was a lot of talk about the Jews. And from that moment on, I felt that the word Jew was threatening because it is whispered around us, this problem is talked about in veiled terms, one feels that there is something oppressing, worrying."

1942 Restrictions

- At the beginning of 1942, things worsened. All of a sudden, Jews were no longer allowed to go to the library or the park, and they were restricted to the last car in trains.
- They avoided talking about the war, but Annette describes how it impacted her daily life.
- In June 1942, they had to begin wearing the Yellow Star of David. Her mother sewed it onto their clothes, and walked proudly with it on the street, but once Annette arrived at school, it created a distinction between her and the other children. There was only one other Jewish girl in her classroom, whom she wasn't aware was Jewish before.

« Je n'ai pas tellement le souvenir. Moi, les conditions du départ, le seul souvenir que j'en aie c'est qu'on respire parce que c'était irrespirable, c'était vraiment irrespirable. Et puis d'un coup, on avait espoir »

"I don't remember much. The only memory I have of the conditions upon departure is that we breathed because it was stifling, it was really oppressive. And then all of a sudden, we had hope."



Early War (1940-1941)

- Beginning of 1940, Annette relocated to Sarthe with her 3 brothers and mother. She describes Sarthe as hosting many refugees and Jews from Paris. Her father was tasked with sewing decorations onto the uniforms of German soldiers.
- In 1941, the family returned to Paris. Annette's father was placed in a camp for immigrant workers, as the family was considered to be "foreign Jews"



Vel d'Hiv (1942)

- Annette's father was able to go into hiding before the Vel d'Hiv Roundup at the home of a *concierge* French woman who lived not too far from the Muller family apartment
- July 16, 1942: very early in the morning, Annette's family was awakened by loud knocks on the door. Two French police officers entered the family's apartment. Annette's mother pleaded to the officers to leave her children alone, but they persisted. The police officers allowed Annette to go buy a comb. Although Annette was urged by the lady at the store to save herself and not return home, Annette recalls that as a 9 year-old girl, those directions weren't explicit enough for her to know where to go. She thus returned to their apartment where the family was rounded up.
- Annette recalls that during the roundup, non-Jews around them applauded, because they were content to see the Jews being arrested.
- Annette's mother was able to help her two eldest sons escape prior to being transported to Vel d'Hiv. She arranged for them to pretend to be sons of the wife of a prisoner of war who was able to be released.
- Annette, her younger brother, and her mother were all transported to Vel d'Hiv.
- She recounts the atrocities she observed at Vel d'Hiv, namely: people committing suicide by jumping off the bleachers, constant screaming, children running around, a paralyzed man being left helpless on the ground, no food or water supply, etc.

Beaune-la-Rolande & Drancy (1942)

- Originally a camp housing only Jewish males of foreign origin, these men were sent to Auschwitz in March & April 1942 to make room for the women and children that would arrive on the Vel d'Hiv transports.
- After Vel d'Hiv, Annette, her brother, and mother were transported to Beaune-la-Rolande around July 21-22.
- On August 7, their mother departed on the last convoy to Auschwitz. Annette remembers the painful separation of children from their mothers.
- Over 2,000 children were left all alone in Beaune-la-Rolande after all the adults had already been deported.
- Between August 20-25, Annette and her brother were transported to Drancy. Annette recalls the children singing along the way, because they were hopeful to be reunited with their mothers there, which ultimately they were not.
- Annette remembers that while at Drancy, her name and her brother's name were crossed out from the list of convoys to Auschwitz at the very last moment, which was crucial to their survival.



*« Un regard de dégoût »
« Je me laissais mourir »
« On était vraiment abandonnés, complètement abandonnés, complètement seuls »
"A gaze of disgust"
"I left myself to die"
"We were truly abandoned, completely abandoned, completely alone."*

End of 1942 - 1945

- Annette's mother was murdered in Auschwitz
- Annette's father was able to organize aid for Annette and her brother, with the help of a leader of l'Union Générale des Israélites de France (l'UGIF). Specifically, he was able to get them the title of furriers, which was in high demand by the Germans, and that is how they were released from Drancy.
- Annette and her brother initially hid at l'Asile Lamarck, were then reunited with their 2 older brothers, before being transferred to an orphanage in Neuilly-sur-Seine, until they were evacuated to a convent in Auvergne, where Annette stayed for 3 years, but her brothers were transferred to Seine-et-Marne.
- At the end of the war, Annette's father was able to retrieve his children, with some reluctance on their part.



Post-War Period

- At the end of the war, Annette's father was able to transfer his children to a children's home for deportees, where deported children were gathered in Mans (run by l'O.S.E.)
- With great difficulty, Annette's father was eventually able to reclaim their apartment.
- After the war, Annette and her father would go to Hôtel Lutétia to search for Rachel (Annette's mother), but she never returned from Auschwitz. Annette went to a Catholic school and had the *Croix d'honneur* distinction, which she would bring to Lutétia every day with the hopes of showing it to her mother.
- At the end of the war, Annette was 11 years old. She returned to school around the age of 17, but no longer had the desire to complete high school.
- At the end of the war, Annette returned to her father's apartment with her brothers, but they didn't get along too well at first. Over time, their relationship improved, and they cared for one another.
- After marrying at age 17, and having 2 children, Annette eventually went back to school, took the Bac and obtained a Bachelor's degree.

*« Mais tous les jours on attendait et évidemment, elle n'est jamais revenue »
"But everyday we waited and evidently, she never returned."*



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