

9 *“Irène gone today”*

The Arrest

On Monday, July 13, Michel sent a telegram to Robert Esménard and André Sabatier in Paris: “Irène gone today suddenly. Destination Pithiviers (Loiret) Hope you can intervene. stop. Tried without success to telephone—Michel Epstein.”¹

Irène Némirovsky was arrested on July 13, 1942, by the French police. They confiscated her food-ration card and wrote on the back of it: “taken to Toulon s/Arroux on July 13, 1942 on order of the French authorities.”² A schoolteacher from Issy-L'Évêque recalled the event some thirty years later:

On the day of [Irène's] arrest by the Gestapo, Madame Molard [the principal of the girl's school], came to warn me in a panic and I immediately took the girls [Denise and Elisabeth] to my house where my mother was. Nothing serious happened at the school, at least I don't remember that there was any investigation that day, but we were all frightened. Luckily Madame Michaud was there! I remember that the gendarme Besson tried to warn [Irène] and even asked her, “don't you want to say good-bye to your children?” She answered, “one adieu is enough.”³

It is clear from the correspondence that, at the time Irène was arrested, Michel still firmly believed he could get her freed by their “influential friends.” It is clear also from the correspondence that the French authorities announced to Irène that her arrest was part of a “widespread measure taken against expatriate Jews between the ages of 16 and 45,” and that she would be taken to the camp at Pithiviers.⁴

Irène was first brought to Toulon-sur-Arroux, approximately 13 kilometers from Issy-L'Évêque, where she remained imprisoned for three nights. The evening of her arrival she scrawled a brief note in pencil to Michel: "For the moment I am at the police station where I ate black currants and red currants waiting for them to come and get me . . . I am convinced it won't be long. I thought we could also approach Caillaux and Abbé Dimnet, what do you think?" Caillaux was, of course, well known; Ernest Dimnet is a more obscure figure. A popular philosopher, and close friend of the collaborationist author and journalist Alphonse de Châteaubriant, he had probably met Irène while she was writing for Bernard Grasset, who was also Dimnet's publisher.⁵

Irène spent two days in prison; on Thursday, July 16, she was transferred to the internment camp at Pithiviers. This camp, which had been built by the Germans in 1940 for French prisoners of war, had already received more than 2000 Parisian Jews in May 1941. Along with Beaune-la-Rolande, Pithiviers was managed by Vichy in collaboration with the Germans. Before July 1942 it was mainly a camp for men, where the prisoners, in spite of insufficient food and abominable sanitary conditions, had succeeded in creating an active cultural life with speeches, concerts, meetings, and religious services. One could receive packages, in limited quantities, and some people managed to gain their freedom, mainly for health reasons.⁶ But in July, everything changed. Visits, as well as leaves, were prohibited. The Gestapo was tightening its grip.

When Irène arrived in Pithiviers, the camp had already taken in Jews from the Paris round-ups—men, women and children—the result of the "spring wind" operation that had just begun. Obersturmführer Dannecker, head of the Jewish section of the S.D. (Sicherheitsdienst, the German security service), had proposed a deportation of 40,000 Jews in three weeks, with three convoys leaving every week, each one carrying approximately 1000 Jews from the Pithiviers and Beaune-la-Rolande camps. Already on June 26, a convoy (no. 4) with 999 Jewish men crowded into railway cars had left for Auschwitz. But the camp did not have enough prisoners for Dannecker's plan to be carried out. The huge arrest of Jews in Paris was intended to "remedy" this situation.

The regulations of the camp allowed inmates one letter a week ("written *only in French*")⁷ and two packages a month, but all were inspected.

Irène was able to send Michel a postcard on Wednesday, July 15, in which she wrote: "There is disorder at the moment, but the food is *very* good. It even surprised me."⁸ It is doubtful that this note revealed the truth. One must read between the lines and imagine the sense of the word "disorder," for conditions prevailing in the camps in the aftermath of massive arrivals from Paris were known to be atrocious.⁹

On Thursday, July 16, convoy number 6 prepared to leave for the Auschwitz concentration camp. Like previous convoys, it was required to be made up of 1000 prisoners. The camp commander, Lieutenant Le Vagueresse, had signed the deportation order the same day: on the list, as number 96, is inscribed the name Epstein, Irène, born 2-11-1903 in Kiev, profession "woman of letters." A total of 119 women and 809 men were on the list.¹⁰ Irène sent a postcard to Michel: "I think we are leaving today."¹¹ But the convoy was actually scheduled to leave the following day.

On Friday, July 17, Irène was awakened very early, before sunrise. She waited on the platform with the others. Beside her were Chana Grinberg, salesclerk from Aunay-sur-Serein in the department of Yonne; Linda Rezelbach, worker, from Sens; Anita Oppinheimer, hairdresser, from Dijon; Thérèse Katz, student, from Dijon; Rachel Pronin, pianist, from Paris. At the last minute, Jacqueline Ribstein, a hairdresser from Paris, was scratched off the list by the occupation authorities.¹² Almost all the prisoners were foreign born, most from Poland, and the majority were aged between 33 and 42; children under 16 were supposedly not eligible for deportation. There was, however, a 15-year-old boy, Gérald Souweine, who wrote a note before leaving: "Everybody, women, men, sometimes old men, a few sick people and children (girls of 13) are loaded in . . . and me along with them. I don't know where. I'll go to the East in any case."¹³

The convoy left Pithiviers at precisely 6:15 A.M. It took two days to get to Auschwitz. On July 19, Irène, like all the others in the concentration camp, was indelibly marked with a number on her forearm. The women of convoy 6 all had a number between 9550 and 9668.¹⁴ Irène was assigned to a bunk; because of her age she was not gassed immediately on arrival. One month later an epidemic of typhus (a frequent occurrence at Auschwitz) broke out. More than 200 prisoners fell ill, among them Irène Némirovsky. She died in the camp on August 19, 1942, at the age of 39.

Why was Irène arrested and deported? At first sight the answer is simple: she was on the list of foreign Jews included in the census of September 1940. On July 2, René Bousquet, secretary general of the ministry of the interior for the police since May 1942, had promised the Germans that the French police would arrest foreign Jews. This decision was confirmed by Pierre Laval himself in a communication he sent to Berlin on July 6. The wave of arrests was meant to target mainly nationals from Eastern Europe, including Soviet Russians and White Russians, men and women between the ages of 16 and 55.¹⁵ Irène fulfilled all these conditions. Unlike other Jews, who had gone into hiding, Irène was not denounced to the authorities. Imprudently, neither she nor Michel hid themselves or their origins. Everyone in Issy-L'Évêque knew her; the German authorities knew her.

Irène's arrest fell within the framework of a much vaster operation unleashed by the French police on the orders of the German authorities in the Saône-et-Loire department. Those slated for deportation at that time were all registered Jews without French citizenship. Thus the commissioner of police of the Renseignements Généraux of Autun was able to write in March of 1943 that, "Jews of foreign nationality have all been arrested and sent to concentration camps."¹⁶

What is curious and unexplained about Irène's arrest is the fact that her husband was not taken into custody at the same time; he would not be arrested until October. No document exists to clarify this odd occurrence. Perhaps there were administrative reasons; it was necessary to fulfill quotas on certain convoys. Michel's convoy, number 42 on November 6, was made up of 998 men, women, and children.

The Reaction

As soon as Irène was arrested, Michel began trying to gain her release. He turned to Albin Michel for help; he had no other contacts in Paris except for his brother. What happened later—vain attempts to liberate Irène, fruitless contacts with celebrated individuals, moving letters addressed to the Germans—shows clearly the nightmare lived by those who were temporarily spared and the total incomprehension of all, Jews and non-Jews alike, before a situation whose real horror they could not imagine.

Irène's arrest brought Michel to a state of panic. "I tried in vain to reach you yesterday on the phone" he wrote on July 14 to Sabatier. "The gendarmes took my wife away yesterday. Destination, it seems, the concentration camp in Pithiviers (Loiret). Reason: general measures taken against stateless Jews between 16 and 45 years old. My wife is Catholic and our children are French. Can anything be done for her?"¹⁷ Michel apparently believed that, despite the fact that the French statutes defined Irène as Jewish (since she had at least three Jewish grandparents), she would be recognized as Catholic. The same day Michel received a letter from an acquaintance of Julie Dumot, Jean Giomarc'h, living in Paris, whom he had informed the day before of Irène's arrest: "I am confused. What can I do? I immediately thought of Madame de C. [Chambrun], but Monsieur Paul Epstein has an appointment with the count [de Chambrun] this evening. I will see your brother tomorrow at noon and we will join efforts. I will take his advice and perhaps inform Madame de Régnier."¹⁸ "Madame de C." was Josée Laval, daughter of Pierre Laval, in charge of the Vichy government under the authority of Pétain. That Michel's brother Paul was able to secure an appointment with René de Chambrun, her husband, shows to what extent the doors of "influential people" close to the Vichy régime were open to Irène, Michel, and their family. To be sure, some Jewish artists and writers did succeed in getting released from the camps. Maurice Goudekot (husband to Colette), for example, was released in 1941 after the intercession of Héléne Morand, who made his case to the wife of Otto Abetz, Germany's ambassador in Paris.¹⁹ Jean-Jacques Bernard was freed from the camp in Compiègne. Michel was therefore not entirely mistaken in believing that, by appealing to certain highly-placed individuals, he could get for Irène the treatment that was given to some others. But between the sympathy expressed by these people for Irène's predicament and their willingness or ability to get her released, there would be an insurmountable gap.

During the days immediately following Irène's arrest, Sabatier, quite unaware that she was being deported to Auschwitz, tried all means at his disposal to free her, while seeing to the material needs of her family. Michel and the children needed to be provided for, and Sabatier continued to send payments to Julie Dumot. He was also astute enough to realize that his letters could be read, so he was highly circumspect in

referring to Julie Dumot. He advised Michel to destroy "all correspondence on this subject, business or personal, which appears superfluous to you." "You understand me," he added.²⁰

At the same time, Sabatier wrote to his friend Jacques Benoist-Méchin, secretary of state to Laval:

Our author and friend I. Némirovsky has just been transported from Issy-L'Évêque, where she lived, to Pithiviers. Her husband has just informed me of this. She is a White Russian, Jewish as you know, who never engaged in political activities; she is a novelist of very great talent, who always served her adoptive country honorably, and she is the mother of two young daughters, aged five and ten years. I BEG you to do ALL that you can.²¹

In an undated telegram to Michel (probably sent July 16) Sabatier spoke of other contacts he had had with people who could prove useful: Paul Morand, Bernard Grasset, and Albin Michel, who, he said, were taking "collective steps" on Irène's behalf with the Vichy authorities.

After Michel received Irène's card informing him of her departure from Pithiviers for "an unknown destination,"²² the situation became clearer, but also more desperate. Michel communicated the latest developments to Sabatier, who responded on July 24: "All that is necessary has been done. I saw my friend [Benoist-Méchin] who told me there was nothing more to do but wait. I stressed to him the French nationality of your children after your first letter, and [Irène's] possible departure for the Loiret camp after your second."²³

But Michel could not, as he was advised by Sabatier, simply wait. He had to act and find a way to convince the authorities that they had made a mistake. He now realized that claiming Irène to be Catholic was useless; he wondered therefore if he should point out to the authorities that his wife implicitly supported the anti-Communist policies of the German régime. This was the question he put to Sabatier on July 26:

Regarding the situation of my wife, perhaps it is necessary to point out that she is a White Russian who has always refused to accept Soviet nationality, and who, after much persecution, fled Russia with her parents, and whose entire fortune was confiscated. I myself am in the same situation and I believe I do not exaggerate when I name a figure of approximately one hundred million pre-war francs that were taken from us there, from both myself and my

wife. My father was president of the Association of Russian Banks and delegated administrator of one of the biggest banks in Russia, the Commercial Bank of Azov-on-Don. The authorities concerned can therefore be assured that we have not the slightest sympathy for the present [Soviet] régime. My younger brother, Paul, was a personal friend of the Grand-Duke Dimitri of Russia, and the imperial family living in France was often received at my father-in-law's house, in particular the Grand-Dukes Alexander and Boris.²⁴

Michel enclosed with this letter the recommendation written for him by the German officer before his departure from Issy-L'Évêque. He may have known that his brother Paul had also been arrested, although that news would not be confirmed for a few days. In any case neither he nor Sabatier could know, in the summer of 1942, what awaited Irène or Paul in the "East" to which they had been deported. They imagined work camps—a hard life certainly—but even those who had heard rumors of the gas chambers could not actually believe they existed.²⁵ Accordingly, it was imperative that Irène, who suffered from asthma, be kept from the harsh conditions that would put her health in danger. Making a point of Irène's health problems is thus a tactic that Michel would use.²⁶ Another tactic was to try to demonstrate to the Germans that, despite her Jewish origins, Irène was anti-Semitic. He wrote to Sabatier: "Do you want to see *Les Échelles du Levant* for which you have the manuscript and which appeared in *Gringoire*? The book is quite hard on the hero who has a Jewish background and is a charlatan of a doctor; but I don't remember if my wife specified that he was Jewish. I think she did . . .

²⁷ In fact Michel is in error regarding *Les Échelles du levant*, for Dario Asfar, although he comes from some obscure country in the east, is not Jewish, but of mixed Greek and Italian ancestry.

Sabatier found that the example given by Michel "does not . . . in any way appear to respond"²⁸ to proof of anticommunism or anti-Semitism. Michel persisted in his efforts to show that Irène represented no threat at all to the Germans or to the French state. On July 27, he drafted a letter to Otto Abetz, the German ambassador in Paris. Michel clearly believed in the logic of a régime that had no logic except that of terror. He reasoned that, because the Germans were staunchly anticommunist, they must have sympathy for the White Russians who fled the Soviet régime. Furthermore, since the Germans detest the Jews, by the same

logic, they must respect those authors who harshly scrutinize the Jewish character. Michel also seemed to believe that Abetz, whose virulent anti-Semitism was well known, would be moved by the plight of his wife. His letter expresses his deepest despair:

I know that by addressing you directly, I am perhaps overstepping my bounds. I nevertheless am taking this step since I believe you alone can save my wife. I place in you my last hope. Please allow me to express the following . . . On Monday, July 13, my wife was arrested. She was taken to the concentration camp in Pithiviers (Loiret), and from there to an unknown destination. This arrest took place, I was told, because of general instructions regarding Jews, given by the occupying authorities. My wife, Madame M. Epstein, is a well-known novelist, I. Némirovsky. Her books have been translated in a great number of countries, and at least two of them, *David Golder* and *Le Bal*, in Germany. My wife was born in Kiev (Russia) on 2.11.1903. Her father was an important banker. My own father was president of the central committee of the Banks of Commerce of Russia, and delegated administrator to the Bank of Azov-on-Don. Our two families lost considerable fortunes in Russia. My father was arrested by the Bolsheviks and imprisoned in the Saint Peter and Paul Fortress in Petersburg. It is with great difficulty that we succeeded in fleeing Russia in 1919; we then took refuge in France and we have never left since. All this must reassure you that we have nothing but hatred for the Bolshevik régime. In France, no member of our family has ever been involved in politics. I have been a managing clerk of a bank; as for my wife, she has become a respected novelist. In none of her books, which incidentally have not been prohibited by the occupying authorities,²⁹ will you find a word against the Germans, and although my wife is Jewish she speaks of Jews without any tenderness . . . I also am taking the liberty to point out to you that my wife has always kept away from any political party, and that she has never profited from any favor either from the left or the right, and that the magazine to which she contributed as a writer, *Gringoire*, whose chief editor is H. de Carbuccia, has certainly never been kind to either Jews or Communists . . . I know, Mr. Ambassador, that you are one of the most eminent men in the government of your country. I am convinced also that you are a just man. It therefore seems unjust and illogical to me that the Germans would imprison a woman who, though originally Jewish, has no sympathy, and all her books show this, either for Judaism or Bolshevism.³⁰

In order to be certain of the letter's delivery, Michel sent it to Sabatier, asking him to entrust it to the Comte de Chambrun as well as to Hélène Morand, a great friend of the Abetz family. Sabatier complied on July 28, adding, probably for form's sake, that the letter contained "interesting precisions" but that "certain sentences are unfortunate."³¹

On July 29, Michel received a letter from his sister, Mavlik. Paul, she informed him, had been arrested; she was the only member of the family still living in Paris. This letter attests to the confusion that reigned for all concerned. "I was mad with despair but I got the better of it and am running about all day trying to get news," wrote Mavlik. She was certain that her brother, Samuel, was imprisoned in Beaune-la-Rolande, that his mistress Germaine was going to see him, and that, at the same time, she would be able to see Irène in Pithiviers. She was wrong on all counts. Visits to the camps were not authorized in July 1942; neither Samuel, his wife, nor his brother, Paul, were at Beaune-la-Rolande. They were at Drancy.³² They would all be deported to Auschwitz at the end of July 1942. Not one of them returned. Letters sent from the internment camps sometimes spoke of conditions there as not being so bad. Thus in her letter to Michel, Mavlik quoted other friends writing from Drancy: "they are well treated and fed."³³ Mail from these camps often reflected existing propaganda rather than reality.

Mavlik's letter helped keep Michel from imagining the worst. Irène, he now believed, was "in a camp somewhere in France under the guard of French soldiers." But on August 9, he learned "from a very dependable source" that three weeks previously, all those detained at Pithiviers "[had] been sent to the German border, and from there on toward the East, Poland or Russia most likely." Deportation "to a barbaric country under conditions that are probably atrocious, without money or food, among people whose language she doesn't even know, that is intolerable," he added.³⁴ The last sentence is curious, for Irène certainly spoke Russian, although not Polish. At any rate, twenty-three years in France, in Michel's eyes, had turned them both into French people. Russia had become a foreign country to them.

As far as Sabatier was concerned in early August, everything possible had been done for Irène, and it was up to Michel to be patient. "Madame P. Morand is tireless in her dedication," he wrote. "She is multiplying

her efforts. Your letter [to Otto Abetz] is in her hands, and the gist of it is being communicated, along with a medical certificate, by one of the friends she has at the embassy, at this very time." According to Sabatier, Hélène Morand had suggested that Michel no longer take "steps in scattered fashion" and that he consult the "Union Israélite (Jewish Union), which alone, through its diverse functions"³⁵ could enlighten him as to Irène's fate. The Union Générale des Israélites de France (UGIF), to which Sabatier alluded, was an organization created by the law of December 2, 1941, with the encouragement and approval of the Germans. Like the German Judenrat, it was financed in part by funds confiscated from Jews. The UGIF played a rather controversial role during the occupation, for it was required to cooperate with the Gestapo; it occasionally helped save some Jews, but the Germans expected it would be complicitous in implementing the "final solution."³⁶

More useful than the advice to consult the UGIF was the analysis Sabatier gave of the situation. He saw clearly that it was futile to take any further action on Irène's behalf. He tried to clarify things to Michel:

1. The measure which impacts your wife is a general order (here in Paris it seems to have affected several thousands of stateless people) and that explains in part the impossibility of obtaining any special consideration, but it also allows us to hope that nothing particularly unusual has happened to your wife.
2. The measure was taken by certain German authorities that are all powerful in this area, and upon whom other German authorities, military or civil, and French authorities, even those that are highly placed, seem to have little possibility of influence.
3. The departure for Germany is credible, not for camps, according to Madame P. Morand, but for Polish cities where they are grouping stateless people.³⁷

Hélène Morand was only repeating here a fiction believed by both Jews and non-Jews in 1942. Even Pierre Laval maintained publicly in September 1942 that deported Jews were being taken to cities in the south of Poland.³⁸ It remains to be seen just what Hélène Morand actually did for Irène. In examining Sabatier's letters, which are the only

indications we have,³⁹ we note two facts: first, that Héléne Morand did not feel it prudent to give Michel's letter directly to Otto Abetz, but rather communicated the "essence" of it, that is, her own interpretation of Irène's situation; second, that even before contacting the German ambassador, Héléne Morand knew—and told Sabatier—that it was impossible to obtain for Irène "a measure of special favor." She clearly was dubious as to the efficacy of anything she could do, and it was doubtless a half-hearted effort that she put forth on Irène's behalf. Furthermore, if other "influential friends" such as Benoist-Méchin ever attempted anything, Sabatier never spoke of it. We must conclude that Irène's situation did not warrant, in the view of Héléne Morand or others close to the German authorities, any kind of serious intervention.

On August 23 a bailiff arrived at Michel's house. He carried in a sealed envelope a summons addressed to Irène for the unpaid rent on the Paris apartment. Because Michel and Irène were married under the system of the separation of property, only Irène was legally responsible for the rent. Since Paul had been arrested and no one remained to look after the apartment, Michel decided to write to the lawyer who had been dealing with the dispute between his wife and the landlord, asking him specifically, "of what use is a summons addressed to a person interned in a camp?"⁴⁰ The lawyer did not react to the desperate irony in Michel's tone and responded dryly: "It will be up to the judge . . . to decide if he must still pass judgment on this affair in the absence of your wife. If you are unable to pay anything, I fear the landlord will try to obtain an annulment of the rental agreement and the sale of the furniture . . ."⁴¹ Thus the apartment furniture would be sold and, like so many other Jewish lodgings in Paris, other belongings pillaged.⁴² Michel's financial situation went from bad to worse. He had to liquidate his reserves; in September 1942, he possessed only three shares of stock in the Bon Marché department store, which were in his wife's name, and was living on a small annuity allowed him by his former employer, the Banque des Pays du Nord, along with the monthly payments sent by Albin Michel.⁴³

From the end of August 1942, Michel no longer spoke of liberating Irène, but rather of trying to lessen the harshness of conditions for her in the camps or in the city where he believed she was. "I have undertaken no new steps," he wrote to Sabatier. "If the Red Cross could at

least have clothing, money, and books sent to Irène before the coming of winter.⁵⁴ Another idea: "What if we changed places, if they took me instead of my wife?"⁵⁵ Sabatier answered that "an exchange is at the moment impossible. It would only make for an added internee."⁵⁶ Sabatier suggested coming to see Michel in Issy-L'Évêque; Michel thanked him but said he had "nothing new . . . to report."⁵⁷

Toward the end of September, Michel noticed that his identity card would expire on November 18. To renew it he had to see the prefect of the Saône-et-Loire department in Mâcon. He was, however, loathe to take this step: "I would not wish this request to bring new worries upon us,"⁵⁸ he wrote to Sabatier. He asked Sabatier to intercede with the prefect in Mâcon. Sabatier answered: "Don't do a thing. Any steps taken seem to me extremely imprudent."⁵⁹ Michel then asked Sabatier if he should "give the children a change of scene,"⁶⁰ that is to say, send them away from Issy-L'Évêque. Sabatier's advice was twofold: on the one hand he noted that when Irène was arrested, she was "in complete compliance" with existing laws, but "that did not change anything"; on the other, since the children were French (and Sabatier could not conceive that French children, even Jewish, would be sent to camps), he was not of the opinion "that a change of scene is indispensable."⁶¹ But Sabatier was deluded; while in the beginning, round-ups in the occupied zone only involved foreign Jews, from mid-July 1942 onward, many French Jews, including children, were being arrested. In total, in 1942, one-third of all Jews arrested were French, and more than 6000, out of 76,000, were children under the age of twelve.⁶²

Epilogue

On Friday October 9, Michel Epstein was arrested by the French police. He was taken to the city of Le Creusot and from there to the camp at Drancy. On November 6, he was deported to Auschwitz. The German authorities did not record the date of his death; most likely he was gassed.

Irène and Michel's two daughters, Denise and Élisabeth, were not deported.⁶³ Julie Dumot took them to Cézac, near Bordeaux, where they were kept hidden until the end of the war.

For many years, Albin Michel continued to send monthly payments to Irène's daughters.⁶⁴ In December 1945, Robert Esménard organized a

committee to come to the children's aid and to allow for a monthly stipend to be paid to them over and above the royalties due to their mother.

After the war, the children were placed with the Dames de Sion (The Ladies of Zion), near Paris; subsequently Denise was helped by Jean-Jacques Bernard and Élisabeth went to live with the family of Madeleine Cabour's brother. Élisabeth became an editor, translator, and novelist; she was especially known for *Le Mirador*, a fictional biography of her mother, and *Un Paysage de cendres*,⁵⁵ a novel based on her experiences during the occupation. She died in 1996. Denise lives in Toulouse where she works to preserve the memory of her mother and all Jews who perished in the Holocaust.