

## *Introduction*

*On Monday, July 13, 1942, two French gendarmes knocked on the front door of a large stone house in the little Burgundy village of Issy-L'Évêque, nestled in the hills of the Morvan. The house had been recently rented by a family from Paris. Like many villages, Issy-L'Évêque had become a refuge for Parisians fleeing the city. It was easy to get food here and to live relatively well on homegrown vegetables, eggs, and chickens. When it got cold, as it often did on the Morvan plateau, wood was readily available for the stove. But Issy-L'Évêque, though close to the "free" (Vichy) zone, was in occupied territory. A contingent of German soldiers had been stationed there and had recently left, called to battle on the Eastern Front.*

The large house was near the middle of the village, just opposite the monument to the war dead erected after the Great War of 1914–1918. In July 1942, it had been rented to a family of refugees from Paris, the Epsteins. Everyone in Issy-L'Évêque knew them. Michel Epstein was a former banker who had left his position in Paris for health reasons; he was gregarious and spent hours chatting with neighbors at the *bureau de tabac*. His knowledge of German had enabled him to help translate for the Wehrmacht troops when they had been billeted in the village. His two daughters, Denise and Élisabeth, were at the village school. A local woman, Cécile Michaud, was employed as their governess.

Michel Epstein's wife was called Irène, and most people knew her by the name Irène Némirovsky. She was a highly successful novelist and short story writer who had chosen to keep her maiden name for her literary work. Two of her novels had been made into films and her stories

appeared often in the popular weekly newspaper *Gringoire*. Irène was less sociable than her husband. When she left the house out it was usually to visit the local priest or to climb up into the woods close to town with her note pad and, occasionally, her two daughters in tow.

Everybody in Issy-L'Évêque had seen the Epsteins at Sunday mass and had noticed Denise's white gown when she had her first communion. Yet they knew that this family was different from most of the inhabitants of the village, and they were not surprised when Michel and Irène appeared, in May 1942, with a yellow Star of David sewn to their clothes. It was not as though the Epsteins wanted to keep their origins a secret. People knew through their governess that Michel and Irène had been born in Russia and that they had applied for French citizenship. Everyone in the village who had read Irène's most popular novel, *David Golder*, or who had seen the movie, knew that she had an insider's view of the community of Jewish businessmen in Paris. The Epsteins were not hiding; they were simply trying to survive in a country at war.

The gendarmes who came to the big house on the Route de Grury on that July day were looking for Irène, not Michel or the children. They politely asked her to come with them; she prepared a little suitcase with some clothes, toiletries, and a book. The manuscript of the novel she was working on, an epic of the war and occupation, remained behind her; it would stay hidden for more than half a century before being published and hailed as a masterpiece.<sup>1</sup> She kissed her husband goodbye; she was certain she would be home again soon. The gendarmes took Irène to the police station and from there to the village of Toulon sur Arroux, about thirteen kilometers from Issy-L'Évêque.

Three days later, on Thursday, July 16, Irène was sent to a detention camp at Pithiviers, in the department of the Loiret, north of Orléans. A day later—on Friday, July 17, in the early morning hours—she was awakened and told to get dressed and packed. Along with 118 other women and 809 men, she was herded into a waiting train. For two days this train traversed France, Germany, and Poland. Its prisoners had no water, no food, and no toilets. The heat was stifling.

On July 19, 1942, Irène and the others arrived at Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland. She passed her first inspection and was assigned to a barracks. For almost a month she managed to survive in almost un-

imaginable conditions. But in mid-August an epidemic of typhus raged through the camp. Irène, who drank the polluted water like everyone else, fell ill. On August 19, 1942, she died.

More than sixty years after Irène Némirovsky's death, it is tempting to see her as a martyr, and surely she was that. The country she loved, and whose literature she so enriched, arrested her and gave her over to the enemies of humanity. Tragically, she never attained in her lifetime the status she has been awarded posthumously, that of one of the twentieth century's most important French authors.

Yet, when the life and work of Irène Némirovsky are closely examined, the results are troubling, even disconcerting. When one looks for consistency, one finds contradictions.

Irène was born in Kiev and emigrated to France in 1919, when she was sixteen years old. Yet she had little to do with Russian émigré circles and never wrote in Russian. Although she was Jewish, her friends and acquaintances were often on the political right, even on the extreme right, at a time when virulent anti-Semitism was the bread and butter of these circles. She could count as friends anti-Semites such as the writers Paul Morand and Jacques Chardonne, or political figures such as Jacques Benoist-Méchin and Joseph Caillaux. She often published her works (which include more than a dozen novels and more than thirty short stories) in reviews and weeklies that also published vitriolic articles against Jews.

Even more troubling than Irène's choice of friends and colleagues were the caricatures of Jews she inserted into some of her novels and short stories. At times, these caricatures seem almost to mirror those that we can find in the right-wing publications where her work appeared. How can we explain the harsh cruelty of these portraits?

And how can we explain the fact that Irène Némirovsky, along with her husband and children, was baptized in the Catholic faith in 1938, at the very time that she seemed to have made her peace with the Jewish people and had written some of her most sympathetic portraits of Jews? Was this conversion the result of profound religious conviction or was it a futile effort to avoid racial and religious persecution? What was Irène's relationship to the Jewish people?

We find ourselves faced with an enigma: who was Irène Némirovsky?

A French author? She wrote in French, and her name is engraved on the Pantheon in Paris, but she was never able to acquire French nationality, in spite of a request made in 1938. A Russian author? She certainly spoke and read Russian, and she is the author of a biography of Chekhov, but she never wrote in the language of her country of origin.

Was Irène Némirovsky a Jewish writer? This is the most problematic aspect of her work. Her first major novel was about a Jewish businessman and it earned her a reputation as a Jewish writer. But certain aspects of her portrayal of Jews offended the Jewish community in Paris. For Léon Poliakov, the French historian of anti-Semitism, Irène Némirovsky was simply an anti-Semite.<sup>2</sup> But the situation is more complex. Her attitude toward Judaism is at once critical and sympathetic. During the nightmare of the occupation, she never denied that she belonged to the Jewish people. Baptized as a Catholic, perhaps even believing in Christianity, Irène nonetheless died as a Jew.

To properly grasp the multifaceted persona of this author, it would be tempting to delve closely into her life. But a biography of Irène Némirovsky, in the strict sense of the term, comes up against an understandable—though tragic—lack of pertinent documentation. The Nazi occupation of France, Irène's arrest, the fate of her husband (who was also deported to Auschwitz), as well as that of her children (who were hidden from the Nazis)—all these factors combined mean that most of the private documents that allow the historian to give shape and color to a life have been forever lost. The family's Paris apartment, abandoned of necessity in 1940, was ransacked and its contents stolen or destroyed. A childhood friend kept some personal letters; the children carefully preserved, even in their flight from the Nazis, family photos, several notebooks, and the unedited manuscript of *Suite française*. That, and the memories of Irène's eldest daughter (who was thirteen years old when her mother was deported), is all that remains.

We nevertheless have inherited the wealth of the literary work of Irène Némirovsky, and it is here that one can search for keys to the puzzle that is her life. From the first of her works—her severe depiction of Jewish life in Czarist Russia—to the texts penned just before her deportation, we see a woman caught in all her ambiguity, rejecting her past and then assuming it, admiring a France she seemed to believe eternal and then

conscious that it was losing its soul. By studying the way in which her works inform the choices she made in her life, we can attempt to make sense of her faith in her adopted country and its people, even as this country, and many of her friends, abandoned her.

If our approach to Irène Némirovsky is critical and if we pose the questions that her daughter, Élisabeth Gille, dared not ask in her loosely imagined biography *Le Mirador*,<sup>8</sup> it is not because we wish to sully the memory, dear to so many, of this courageous woman who made a career as a writer while remaining a devoted mother and who did her best to protect her offspring from the barbarism looming over France. It is essential that Irène's tragic end not eclipse her multifaceted life. For Irène Némirovsky to be recognized as an important figure in twentieth-century French letters, we must first clear the air that surrounds her. Our study of her life and work will reveal a complex individual, torn by a desire to escape the materialism of her parents' Jewish circles but sympathetic to the fate of her people, enamored of France and its culture yet conscious of her own Slavic background. In short, Irène Némirovsky was an author in search of an identity.