

ARTS & LETTERS

French Fraud

THE SOURCE: "Scandale Française" by Ruth Franklin, in *The New Republic*, Jan. 30, 2008.

WHEN IRÈNE NÉMIROVSKY'S unfinished novel *Suite Française* appeared for the first time in English in 2006, critics and readers greeted it as a revelation. They marveled at how the author managed to create a penetrating, irony-tinged tale about the tumultuous events she was simultaneously experiencing in her own life during the German occupation of France in World War II. In the minds of many, the fact that Némirovsky, a Jew, was ultimately arrested and sent to Auschwitz, where she died in 1942, elevated the interrupted novel to the same level of prophetic poignancy as *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

That impression, *New Republic* senior editor Ruth Franklin writes, persists only because "very few readers in our day know anything about Irène Némirovsky." What makes *Suite Française* so astounding, Franklin asserts, is not that it resided undiscovered in notebooks held by Némirovsky's daughter for 60 years, but that its publication "posthumously capped the career of a writer who made her name by trafficking in the most sordid anti-Semitic stereotypes."

Némirovsky was born in Kyiv in

1903 and raised in an enclave of wealthy Russians, mostly by her French governess. The family spoke French at home, and reportedly never practiced Judaism. According to Franklin, Kyiv's Jews, many of whom lived in a poor neighborhood on the banks of the Dnieper, re-

pulsed Némirovsky; she described their children in a late novel as "swarming vermin." After World War I, the Némirovskys moved to Paris, where Irène's anti-Semitic writings were to achieve immense popular success. Her most notable early novel was *David Golder* (1929)—"an appalling book by any standard," Franklin writes—in which "all the . . . primary characters are Jewish, and all are despicable." She went on to publish novels and many short stories in *Gringoire*, a weekly that, Franklin says, "be-



The revelation of Irène Némirovsky's anti-Semitic writings has tarnished her posthumously published novel about the Nazi occupation of France. Shown in Paris in 1938, she later died in Auschwitz.

came notorious during the 1930s for its harsh anti-Semitic and anti-immigrant editorials.”

Némirovsky's defenders say her novels and stories merely reflect the historical context in which they are set, and she defended herself against contemporary accusations of anti-Semitism by saying of her Jewish characters, “That is the way I saw them.”

To Franklin, two things give the lie to this defense. One is that *David Golder* is no isolated instance. As a recent biography by Jonathan Weiss makes clear, Franklin reports, “Némirovsky was the very definition of a self-hating Jew.” The second damning bit of evidence is a personal letter Némirovsky wrote in September 1940 to Marshal Henri Pétain, leader of the collaborationist Vichy France government. “I cannot believe, Sir,” she wrote, “that no distinction is made between the undesirable and the honorable foreigners”—clearly placing herself in the latter camp. Her plea for exemption from the mounting anti-Jewish strictures was ignored, and publishers began rejecting her writings. After her arrest in July 1942, her husband, Michel Epstein, argued in a letter to the German ambassador that “it 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, . . . for Judaism.”

Suite Française, Franklin argues, “was not just a chronicle; Némirovsky saw it also as a form of revenge” against the country that had abandoned her. The sympathetic portraits of many of the German characters in the novel clearly reflect the author's own feelings. But though numerous critics have admired her unflinching depictions of the French, forced by small steps into full collaboration with their conquerors, many readers have also noted, Franklin says, that “there are no Jewish characters in *Suite Française*.” The ironic detachment Némirovsky employed to such devastating effect against the French may have required too great an effort to encompass her own situation, that of a relentlessly anti-Semitic Jew crushed by cultural prejudices her writings helped perpetuate.

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Bach the Unknowable

THE SOURCE: “J. S. Bach in the Twenty-First Century: The Chapel Becomes a Larder” by Harold Fromm, in *The Hudson Review*, Winter 2008.

THINK OF WOLFGANG AMADEUS Mozart and you might picture an abused little prodigy being ferried to performances across Europe by his greedy father. And many people can't conjure up Ludwig von Beethoven without seeing the irascible genius, completely deaf, having to be turned around to see the tumultuous standing ovation at the premiere of his Ninth Symphony. Compared with the fame of these two masters, the name Johann Sebastian

Bach produces no popular image at all.

Yet Bach (1685–1750) is the “father of Western music,” writes critic Harold Fromm. He's in the “very chemistry of Western musical blood, like red cells, white cells, and platelets in our material plasma.” Bach fails to cut much of a human figure simply because, apart from enough music to fill 160 CDs, he left so little behind. It doesn't help that he lived in Leipzig, far from the great centers of European culture.

Because his only surviving correspondence lies primarily in church and

EXCERPT

Holding a Space for the Theater

The act of dedicating oneself to acting and speaking together—the act of forming some kind of collective theatrical organization—is inherently political. . . . This is no longer possible. . . . We have passed, perhaps not irretrievably, into a period that is postpolitical, postdemocratic, and post-tragic. The political task of theater, in the face of such a collapse, is somehow to hold open a tiny space between the collapsing walls.

—NICHOLAS RIDOUT, professor at Queen Mary University of London and coauthor of *The Theatre of Societas Raffaello Sanzio*, in *Theater* (Fall 2007)