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Community, Survival and Witnessing in Ravensbruck

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**Community, Survival and Witnessing in Ravensbrück: Maisie Renault's *La grande misère*
as Testimony against War Crimes**

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La grande misère is Maisie Renault's account of the several months during World War II, August 1944 to April 1945, when she and her sister Isabelle were interned as political prisoners in Ravensbrück, a concentration camp mainly for women which was 56 miles north of Berlin. In 2000, three years before her death, I met Maisie Renault and she granted me permission to translate her book. She lived in Vannes on the Gulf of Morbihan in Brittany where she had been raised by her patriotic, devoutly Catholic parents, Léon and Marie Renault, who had 10 children.

After the Germans invaded northern France in May 1940, the rapid retreat of French and British troops surprised many French people. The government left Paris for Bordeaux on 10 June; the German army marched victoriously into Paris on 14 June; and Marshal Pétain announced on 17 June that he would lead a new government in armistice negotiations with Germany.¹ When the French government led by Marshall Pétain negotiated terms of surrender with Nazi Germany, many French people were opposed to the government's unpatriotic capitulation.

¹ H.R. Kedward, *Occupied France: Collaboration and Resistance 1940-1944* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 1.

While some members of the previous government fled to North Africa, General de Gaulle went to London and broadcast a message to France on 18 June 1940, followed by his more widely heard 22 June speech on BBC radio urging French people to reject the armistice and resist the German occupation. His speech, and leaflets dropped in France, inspired many French like the Renault family to form Resistance groups and engage in strategies of sabotage, armed conflict and intelligence gathering to end the Nazi occupation.

Maisie Renault's active involvement with the French Resistance began when she came to Paris in 1941 with her eighteen year old sister Isabelle to work as secretary for the intelligence network directed by her brother Gilbert, whose code name was Colonel Rémy. According to Rémy, he was inspired to name the group Confrérie de Notre-Dame during a visit to the church, Notre-Dame-des-Victoires.² Maisie's brother, Claude, fought with the 1st Division of the Free French in North Africa and Italy. Her mother and several siblings also supported the Resistance.

The Confrérie de Notre-Dame (CND) was important in gathering and transmitting military intelligence to the headquarters of Free France in London. In his war memoirs, General Charles De Gaulle describes Colonel Rémy as traveling back and forth from Paris to London to provide military intelligence.

Rémy's network, Confrérie Notre Dame, was working at full spate. . .Not a single military work was built by the enemy on the Channel or Atlantic coasts, particularly in the submarine bases, without its situation and plan being at once known to us. Rémy had,

² Guy Perrier, *Rémy: l'agent secret no 1 de la France libre* (Paris: Perin, 2001), 78.

in addition, organized contacts methodically, either with other networks, with the movements in the occupied zone, or with the communists.³

For several months in advance of the Normandy landings, parachutists were secretly being dropped into France in an operation known as the Sussex Plan. The three principal men coordinating the Sussex Plan were Rémy for the Free French intelligence service; Colonel Francis Pickens Miller representing the U. S. Office of Strategic Services; and Commander Kenneth Cohen for British Secret Intelligence Service.⁴ After the liberation of France, General Omar Bradley confided to Rémy that the remarkable precision of their intelligence network had largely contributed to the choice of certain locations for the Allied landings.⁵

Germaine Tillion, fellow Ravensbrück prisoner and friend of Maisie Renault, was an anthropologist at the Musée de l'Homme in 1940. Led by Boris Vildé, Yvonne Oddon and Anatole Lewitsky, one of the first organized networks was formed by the museum “ethnologists and other scientists. . . [and] produced a clandestine paper calling on French people to fight the

³ Charles de. Gaulle, *The Call to Honour, 1940-1942: The War Memoirs of Charles de Gaulle, vol. 1*, trans. Jonathan Griffin (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955), 273-4.

⁴ R. Harris Smith, *OSS: the Secret History of America's First Central Intelligence Agency*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 163.

⁵ Perrier, *Rémy*, 94.

Occupation.”⁶ Tillion emphasized that the Resistance was initially a spontaneous mass movement arising among people from a diverse array of political orientations and all social classes from the aristocracy to peasants, motivated primarily by their firm rejection of the armistice which was regarded as shameful.⁷

Eventually the Confrérie de Notre Dame and Musée de l’Homme networks, like many other groups in the Resistance, were denounced by collaborators, resulting in the arrest and deportation of members. In June 1942 Maisie and Isabelle were arrested by the Gestapo while staying in Rémy’s apartment. Their mother, brother Philippe and sisters, Hélène, Jacqueline and Madeleine, were arrested in October 1942 and released in February 1944 with the exception of Philippe. He was deported to Neuengamme camp in May 1944, then died in May 1945 when the Allies sunk the German ships which were evacuating prisoners from the camp.

From 1942 to 1944 Maisie and Isabelle were interned at various prisons, and then deported in August 1944 to Ravensbrück as the Allies began liberating France. According to Israel Gutman, "By early February 1945, 106,000 women had passed through the Ravensbrück camp. Twenty-five percent of them were Polish, 20 percent German, 19 percent Russian and Ukrainian, 15

⁶ Bertram M. Gordon, *Historical Dictionary of World War II France: The Occupation, Vichy, and the Resistance, 1938-1946* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1998), 311.

⁷ Jean Lacouture, *Le témoignage est un combat: une biographie de Germaine Tillion* (Paris : Seuil, 2000), 78-79.

percent Jewish, 7 percent French, 5.5 percent Gypsy, and 8.5 percent others."⁸ Germaine Tillion and Geneviève de Gaulle, niece of Charles de Gaulle, were held in the Nacht und Nebel (Night and Fog) section of the camp, which Maisie mentions visiting in her memoir. This section had the purpose of causing political activists to 'disappear', so that no information could be found on their whereabouts or destiny. Maisie and Isabelle Renault, Germaine Tillion and about 300 other French women prisoners were repatriated from Ravensbrück by Count Bernadotte and the Swedish Red Cross in April 1945.

In 1947 when she wrote her account of the Ravensbrück experience, Maisie intended it to serve both as remembrance of those who did not return and as testimony of the horrible conditions and abusive treatment in this camp. In 1948, *La grande misère* was awarded the prix vérité, a prize awarded to a factual literary work about a contemporary event. While her book shares some characteristics with other concentration camp accounts by French women and with Holocaust survivor testimony, Maisie's style and perspective are uniquely reflective of her genteel, Catholic background. Moreover, *La grande misère* is written in the first person and present tense, organized chronologically almost like a diary, which gives it a sense of immediacy and drama that distinguish it from some accounts of the camps written years after the experience and in a more objective style.

La grande misère thus offers a uniquely intimate account of the horrors and suffering that Maisie Renault and her friends experienced at Ravensbrück but its immediacy also reveals some

⁸ *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, ed. Israel Gutman (New York: Macmillan, 1990), s.v. "Ravensbrück."

absences that might be expected in a text which lacks the distance characteristic of similar accounts written longer after the experience. According to Andrea Reiter, "It is quite clear that the time which elapses between an experience and a report about it has an influence at the level not only of content but also of narrative structure. The manner of presentation generally acquires greater weight with the passing of time, with reflection...and increasing knowledge."⁹ Thus later texts often have a greater sense of literary style and cohesive historical accuracy than one that is written as an outpouring of recent traumatic events. Reiter states that, "A refrain like repetition of short sentences is also frequently used when authors are describing an experience that especially affected them."¹⁰

While Maisie's writing appears relatively devoid of the influence of literary models and rather forged from her attempt to describe what is almost beyond representation, she constructed a narrative which uses fragmented sentences and silences to intensify the unspeakable events occurring on a daily basis in the camps. Her memoir opens in *media res* with a dramatic description of the commander addressing the prisoners shortly before their deportation.

⁹ Andrea Reiter, *Narrating the Holocaust* Trans. Patrick Camiller (New York: Continuum, 2000), 156.

¹⁰ Reiter, *Narrating the Holocaust*, 164

Kratz slowly crossed the deserted and sunny courtyard. As was his habit, he gently nodded his head and noisily shook his bunch of keys. Upon arriving near our group, he stared at us a moment and finally announced "no mass [this] morning, no mass."¹¹

In fact it is only through Remy's introduction that the reader learns the chronological details of the arrest, imprisonment, and deportation of Maisie and Isabelle Renault. Maisie Renault sometimes used silence more powerfully than words about events which were unspeakable as for example, "The next day there is another medical which is still painful to remember." In her book focusing primarily on camp testimony by women, *Testimony from the Nazi Camps*, Margaret-Anne Hutton compares Maisie's silence to Jackye Brun's more explicit description of this type of exam and explains that these procedures were done without attention to sterile conditions so there was risk of infection as well as pain.

With no consideration for the fact that I'm a virgin, he shoves the speculum violently inside me, shortly followed by his rubber-clad finger. . .A bit calmer after talking to other young women in my convoy who underwent the same experience, I realize that my virginity must be a thing of the past.¹²

Gaps occur in the narrative either due to Maisie's lack of knowledge regarding an overview of Ravensbrück or because some things were still too painful to be expressed. A variety of factors

¹¹ Maisie Renault, *La grande misère* (Pontivy: Auffret et le Noheh, 1948), 19.

¹² Margaret-Anne Hutton, *Testimony from the Nazi Camps: French Women's Voices* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 126.

might have made certain situations unspeakable for Maisie. As a middle class French Catholic woman, born in the early twentieth century, certain topics were not discussed, especially relating to gendered bodies or toilet problems. Maisie was very circumspect when describing bodily matters like the medical exam or toilet needs. Because some Russians tried to escape while hiding in the bushes for toilet purposes, the work group was forbidden to leave the path. This is Maisie's description of their humiliating situation:

The sick must exercise their needs during the stop on the bare terrain, watched by the sentinels. When we are constrained by the dysentery that devastates us, those whose health is better thanks to the parcels that they have received at Ravensbrück, murmur disdainfully, "They must not have any modesty."¹³

Dr. Laub as psychiatrist, who listened to and treated trauma survivors and co-author with Shoshona Felman of *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing*, observed that historians were critical of gaps in a survivor's testimony in the conviction that these limits of knowledge challenged the entire validity of the testimony. As a psychiatrist, Laub recognized that her interviews must respect the witnesses' silence as, "the subtle balance between what the woman knew or what she did not, or could not, know."¹⁴

¹³ Renault, *La grande misère*, 127.

¹⁴ Shoshana Felman, and Dori. Laub M.D., *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 61.

Linda Pipet suggests in her book *La notion d'indicible dans la littérature des camps de la mort*, (The Notion of the Unspeakable in Death Camp Literature), that such writing presents a resistance to closure. According to Pipet, "This writing is perpetually becoming. . .the fragment allows for the possibility of a return, a rewriting and the whiteness is the space that is left for the work of questioning."¹⁵

Maisie Renault's use of the present tense gives her audience the impression of reading a journal. As Pipet observes about similar narratives, this use of the present expresses a reliving of these horrific experiences, as if the events of the camp could only be in the present because "these experiences are too strong to belong totally to the past."¹⁶ The following description of their treatment on arriving in the camp is typical of Maisie's present tense narration.

Our turn comes, we must go to the showers. There like all those of the preceding convoys, we will be odiously searched and stripped. Completely nude, we wait to undergo the "hairdresser's" exam. With anxiety, I watch Isabelle, now on the hot seat, pass her test victorious, me also. Behind us a little Bretonne cries and is ashamed of her shaved skull that makes her unrecognizable.¹⁷

¹⁵ Linda Pipet, *La notion d'indicible dans la littérature des camps de la mort* (Paris: l'Harmattan, 2000), 130.

¹⁶ Pipet, *La notion*, 40-41.

¹⁷ Renault, *La Grande Misère*, 28.

For many survivors, it was especially imperative to avoid trivializing the suffering and criminal abuse. According to Reiter, "By and large, survivors seem to have been aware of the danger lurking in a pathos-filled aestheticization of their camp experience."¹⁸ Though Maisie's account avoids extreme pathos, it does express her compassionate awareness of others' suffering. In terse language, Maisie described the death of a woman unknown to her. The woman, moaning and swaying on skeletal legs, eventually falls in a puddle.

Two police go towards her, look with curiosity, then leave again. Finally the moans cease. Undoubtedly the unfortunate woman has ceased to suffer. We did not have the right to move.¹⁹

This laconic style is consistent with other narratives of the camps, as are such other characteristics as silences surrounding unspeakable horror and the use of irony or black humor. These elements of style result from the narrator's difficulty in describing circumstances so horrible and unbelievable that they resist the representational capacity of language.

Maisie often used irony in her account; one of the most striking examples of irony verging on black humor is Maisie's description of her attempt to communicate with a dead woman. After being transferred to a block where the facilities are dirty, crowded and cold due to broken

¹⁸ Reiter, *Narrating*, 166.

¹⁹ Renault, *La Grande Misère*, 69.

windows, the women surveyed the situation and tried to locate a sleeping space away from the windows. Maisie noticed a bed with only one occupant. Thinking that this would be suitable for Suzanne Melot, who was very frail, she called out to the immobile form, “Madame, are you sleeping alone?” and a voice responded, “Can't you see that she is dead.”²⁰

Maisie's account describes relationships among her small group of French comrades in the camp who supported one another by forming a surrogate family. This group was composed of former CND or Libération Nord members and two women from Belgium. Maisie attributed her survival to support from this group. One night she was feeling sick and went to the lavatories. Suddenly it seemed to her that she might die right there when Lucienne Dixon arrived to help her stand up and return to her bed. Maisie commented on this incident, “I truly believe that that night she saved my life by her presence alone.”²¹

When Denise Fournaise weakened and was sent to the infirmary, Maisie and Isabelle visited her there. Much later when Denise was forced to transfer to another room because of her sickly appearance, Maisie joined her there, knowing Denise would be frightened if separated from her friends. Despite this support, Denise did not survive Ravensbrück. Myrna Goldenburg's study of three women's Auschwitz narratives found that these surrogate families are more commonly described in women's accounts than in the narratives of male survivors: “Such bonding was not

²⁰ Renault, *La grande misère*, 70.

²¹ Renault, *La grande misère*, 76.

exclusive to women but it is difficult to find consistent evidence of men's caring about one another to the extent that women did."²²

It was possible to resist the effects of camp traumas and humiliations by maintaining the integrity of an internalized core of self-awareness and ethical values. Maisie's narrative reveals the daily necessity of consciously choosing to behave according to one's internalized value system, which was supported by belonging to a group of women with similar values. In his book, *They Survived*, Wilfred Noyce examined *La Grande Misère*, together with several other stories of people surviving incredible adversity. In the case of Maisie Renault, Noyce wanted to use an example of someone who demonstrated that "moral fibre as well as body can survive . . . physical and mental extremes."²³ He astutely observes that survivors such as Maisie needed to be stubborn, courageous and disciplined as well as moral and sympathetic because fellow prisoners such as Mademoiselle Talet, who were "too charitable," didn't survive.²⁴

Another survival strategy was learning to understand the camp system in order to better oppose the slave labor and dehumanization to Stücks or pieces of refuse, which led to inevitable death. In his biography of Germaine Tillion, Jean Lacouture mentioned that she cooperated with several

²² Myrna Goldenberg, "Memoirs of Auschwitz Survivors," in Dalia Ofer and Lenore J Weitzman, eds., *Women in the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale, 1998), 337.

²³ Wilfrid Noyce, *They Survived: A Study of the Will to Live* (New York: Dutton, 1963), 164.

²⁴ Noyce, *They Survived*, 186.

camp comrades, including Geneviève de Gaulle and Maisie Renault in “rebellious ethnography” to document evidence which could later be used to obtain justice for camp victims.²⁵

In addition to writing *La grande misère*, Maisie Renault continued to testify about Ravensbrück by participating in the annual Concours de la Résistance et de la Déportation, an historical research competition in the French secondary school system which uses themes associated with the Resistance and deportation. In 1999, when Maisie's health prevented her from visiting schools in her region, she prepared a written testimony on concentration camps for the current concours on that theme. This 1999 document again describes the insane taken away in a transport noir as in her 1947 book. However this time Maisie specifies:

Transport that led directly to the gas chamber which is now openly talked about. .
 .swollen legs, sores, wounds signify the death sentence. Entire blocks are full of those
 with typhus. They die like flies. The nude corpses, piled on carts are transported to be
 burned. The crematory burns day and night.²⁶

This 1999 document also provides more details on the experiments practiced on the "rabbits," specifying removal of muscles, sterilization, inoculation with typhus, and burning with phosphorus. Lacouture mentioned that Germaine Tillion and camp comrades, including Anise

²⁵ Lacouture, *Le témoignage*, 167.

²⁶ Maisie Renault, *Temoignage de Maisie Renault*. (Morbihan: Comité de liaison du concours de la Résistance et de la déportation, 1999), n.p.

Postel Vinay, Denise Jacob, Grete Buber-Neuman and Maisie Renault succeeded not only in taking photos of the mutilated legs of these Polish women but also concealed them during selections, thus enabling them to survive the camp as survivors and witnesses.²⁷

After the war, Ravensbrück trials were held at Hamburg, Germany from 1946 to 1948. In the first trial, deputy camp leader Johann Schwarzhuber, some doctors who performed medical experiments, and some wardens and kapos were either executed or imprisoned. Hans Pflaum, camp work leader, whom prisoners called the “cattle merchant,” and Fritz Suhren escaped from the British prior to the Hamburg trials but were recaptured and sentenced to death in the 1950 French military trial at Rastatt, Germany.²⁸

Germaine Tillion published several editions of her book, *Ravensbrück: an eyewitness account of a women's concentration camp* and was the official representative for both Ravensbrück Amicale and the Association des Déportées et Internées de la Résistance at the Hamburg Ravensbrück trials.²⁹ She also attended the Rastatt trials of war criminals.

²⁷ Lacouture, *Le témoignage*, 165.

²⁸ Yveline Pendaries, *Les procès de Rastatt, 1946-1954: le jugement des crimes de guerre en Zone française d'occupation en Allemagne* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), 338.

²⁹ Germaine Tillion, *Ravensbrück: an Eyewitness Account of a Women's Concentration Camp* (New York: Anchor, 1975), 179.

In his preface to *La grande misère*, Louis François describes the moral and physical trials endured by French prisoners in the concentration camps for whom death was not necessarily the worst challenge. He expresses hope that the younger generation would recognize the ability of their elders to master themselves and maintain dignity and moral integrity rather than complain about the horrible circumstances beyond their control. As Inspector General of Public Instruction and a colleague of Maisie Renault in the CND, he recommended wide dissemination of her book so that new generations of French youth would never forget the “horrible contempt for life and human dignity” of the Nazis and appreciate the risks taken and sufferings endured by many French people as the price of their engagement in the liberation of France.³⁰ Rémy’s introduction expresses his respect for his sisters and all the women who contributed to the Resistance:

I well know that thousands and thousands of other women suffered what my sisters suffered and that, like them, these women returned to their everyday lives without asking for anything, estimating that it was already much to still be alive. But permit me to say all the same that I am proud to have sisters like them.³¹

According to Julian Jackson, both Gaullists and Communists promulgated the post war myth that the Resistance was the true France and the Vichy government had been a puppet of Nazi

³⁰ Renault, *La grande misère*, 9.

³¹ Renault, *La grande misère* p.13.

Germany.³² Marcel Ophuls's film, *The Sorrow and the Pity*, released in 1971 and Robert Paxton's book, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940-1944*, published in 1972, challenged previous interpretations of the occupation and resistance. While Henry Rousso credits Ophuls's film with demythologizing the Resistance, he criticizes the film for ignoring "two major components of the Resistance, the Communists and the Gaullists."³³ Paxton's book disclosed that the Vichy Regime had in fact sought collaboration with Germany rather than being coerced, thus refuting the idea that there were two Vichys, a "collaborating and pro-German Vichy of Laval and a patriotic and anti-German one of Pétain."³⁴ Julian Jackson, author of several books on the period, expresses the hope that historians of the Resistance will address the complexity of this period of French history and:

Embrace its full diversity—Gaullist and non-Gaullist, Communist and non-Communist, North and South, men and women, French and immigrants—but also to reconnect the history of the resistance to the society around it, to the French past, and to the Vichy regime.³⁵

³² Julian Jackson, *France: The Dark Years 1940-1944* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 603.

³³ Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France Since 1944* Trans. by Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 106.

³⁴ Jackson, *France: The Dark Years*, 10.

³⁵ Jackson, *France: The Dark Years*, 20.

The number of those active in the Resistance, as officially recognized, was never very large and probably about 2 percent of the population. Robert Paxton mentions that “300,000 Frenchmen received official veterans’ status for active Resistance service: 130,000 as deportees and another 170,000 as ‘resistance volunteers’. Another 100,000 had lost their lives in Resistance activity.”³⁶ In her book, *Sisters in the Resistance*, Margaret Collins Weitz observes that, “Although after victory a fair number of French claimed to be members of the Resistance, they were few and far between in the early days of the Occupation. The exact number can never be known, but 220,000 men and women were officially recognized” by the government.”³⁷

It is important to recognize how few French people were actively involved in the Resistance and fewer still risked their lives for the cause. Maisie and Isabelle Renault were among those who were willing to make this sacrifice. Although Maisie was awarded the Croix de Guerre and the Médaille de la Résistance, the returning deportees did not always receive formal appreciation and support. The first of those deported to return were often met with incomprehension of their experiences. According to Hutton, “The survivors were a small group, possibly an

³⁶ Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940-1944* (New York: Knopf, 1972), 294.

³⁷ Margaret Collins Weitz, *Sisters in the Resistance: How Women Fought to Free France, 1940-1945* (New York : J. Wiley, 1995) 10.

embarrassment to those who had done nothing to help their country during the war.”³⁸ They were in bad health and sometimes could not qualify for disability pensions because those who could testify to their past had often died in the camps. Julian Jackson makes a similar observation about those who were deported, “The sight of these ghostly and emaciated creatures cast a pall over the victory celebrations. Nor was it easy to fit them into the embryonic Gaullist interpretation of the Occupation which required heroes not victims.”³⁹

At the conclusion of her book, Maisie remembers those who died in the camp, “On leaving Ravensbrück, I did not want to look back but I was not able to forget. The physical miseries have lessened; but. . .all those that we have left, rise up suddenly in my memory marked by the acuteness of their suffering.”⁴⁰

This witnessing is a typical feature of concentration camp narratives. Survivors felt a responsibility to tell the stories of those who didn't survive and their memoirs served a therapeutic purpose. The survivors needed to tell the story of this significant episode in their lives in order to move toward a future after the camp experience. According to Dominick LaCapra, "The tendency for a given subject-position to overwhelm the self and become a total identity becomes pronounced in trauma, and a victim's recovery may itself depend on the attempt

³⁸ Hutton, *Testimony from the Nazi Camps*, 298.

³⁹ Jackson, *France: The Dark Years*, 610.

⁴⁰ Renault, *La grande misère*, 174.

to reconstruct the self as more than a victim."⁴¹ Narratives such as *La Grande Misère* are important primary sources and, through the variety of perspectives which they provide, a comprehensive picture of this horrible time emerges.

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⁴¹ Dominick LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1994), 12.

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