

MASTERPIECE WITH A STRANGE OMISSION

SUITE FRANÇAISE IRÈNE NÉMIROVSKY

Éditions Denoël, 2004, 434pp, £16.75

A previously concealed literary masterpiece, the wartime work of renowned writer Irène Némirovsky, *Suite Française* is perhaps the most remarkable publishing phenomenon in recent years. Hailed by French critics as “the definitive novel of our nation in the Second World War”, it has taken 62 years to see the light of day. In the two months since publication, it has already sold over 120,000 copies in France and the rights have been brought in more than 20 countries. November also saw Némirovsky become the first author to be awarded the prestigious Renaudot prize for a posthumous work.

Born in Kiev, Ukraine, in 1903 to a family of Jewish bankers, Némirovsky grew up in St. Petersburg in the lap of luxury. When the Bolsheviks took over and her father was labelled an enemy of the revolution, the family found refuge in France, where they established themselves once again. She was recognised for her literary flair from an early age but her reputation was sealed with the publication of *David Golder* in 1929, which was an instant success. She mixed among the élite of the French literary establishment and drew admiration from the likes of Jean Cocteau and Joseph Kessel not merely for her talent but also her exuberant lifestyle. Her other books published during the 1930s included an acclaimed biography of Chekov.

Suite Française, which presents a penetrating depiction of occupied France, was written whilst Némirovsky was in hiding with her family in a small village in central France between 1940-42. It combines the first two parts of what she originally intended as a five-volume epic, inspired by *War and Peace*. She had completed the second part, *Dolce*, just days before her arrest and deportation to Auschwitz, where she died five weeks later, on 17 August 1942.

When the Nazis came for her husband, Michel Epstein, two months later, after he had campaigned desperately to save his wife, one of the officers took pity on the children and spared their lives. Denise and Elizabeth survived the war, looked after by a governess, who guided them through convents and safe houses. On the journey

they carried their mother’s suitcase, which included family photos and the manuscript of *Suite Française*. Thinking it a journal and for fear of painful memories, the book remained unread. It was not until the late 1980s that Denise Epstein returned to the leather-bound writings and found that they were in fact two novels. Epstein began transcribing the work, a task that she completed just over a decade ago. It was not until April 2004 that she decided to finally share her discovery.

The first part of the book, *Tempest in June*, follows the story of ‘la débâcle’ –



the flight from the Nazis. Némirovsky effectively evokes the chaos and panic as families face impossible dilemmas. During an air-raid attack, the Pericands, a bourgeois family of devout Catholics, run around saving their household silver but forget their senile grandfather. Their son, an idealistic priest, is murdered by a gang of troubled youths who he is trying to save. We encounter people like the Michauds, petty clerks, fearful for their soldier son, who behave ethically as long as they belong to the society of ‘good Frenchmen’. What emerges is a vivid portrayal of the ugly face of humanity when surrounded by a sea of despair.

Dolce, which moves at a slower pace, chronicles the arrival of the first German soldiers at the little village of Bussy and the relationship between the conquered and

the conquerors. With extraordinary sensitivity, Némirovsky shows how the ‘metal monsters’ become curious mortals. Echoing Vercors’ *Le Silence de la Mer*, we witness the development of a caring relationship between a German officer and Lucile, an unhappy woman, who lives with her overbearing mother-in-law and doesn’t really miss her husband, a captive in Germany. We also observe numerous instances of jealousy, resentment and collaboration. This is certainly the picture of a rural France that would take years for the French to acknowledge.

Némirovsky’s ability to write as a novelist about a tragedy in which she was a victim is remarkable. *Suite Française* now joins only a tiny handful of other powerful works written during the war itself.

One aspect of the book is however bewildering: there is not a single mention of Jews throughout the entire work. This is particularly strange, given her Jewish heritage and of course due to her hiding on those very grounds. Reference to her other work does suggest a troubled relationship with her Jewish inheritance. Némirovsky often described Jews in similar ways to the anti-Semitic, stereotypical characterisation that filled the Nazi press. Her wish to dissociate from her origins is further illustrated by her conversion to Catholicism in 1939, a feat which did nothing to avert her fate. None of this however explains the reason for the striking omission of Jews in her final work. No doubt the onset of the Holocaust clouded her former judgement. Perhaps tackling the Jewish problem would have confounded her literary creativity, at least precluding her detachment. Or possibly facing up to her own victim-hood was a task too much to bear.

This omission aside, *Suite Française* will surely create a storm when, the English translation is published by Random House in Autumn 2006. Némirovsky’s important insights into the human psyche, deserve our attention. “What interests me isn’t the history of the world,” she wrote. “It must brush on historic events, but more deeply, it is about daily life, emotional life and the absurdity that this presents.” More than 60 years on, her message is still urgent today.

Review by Simon Eder, publisher of *The Liberal*, a new magazine devoted to politics and the arts.