Proposal Abstract

Throughout World War II, many people recorded the vicissitudes of personal life while at the same time chronicling the momentous events of the time. I propose to write a book manuscript explaining how these personal journals provide a set of unique and yet to be examined insights into the French experience of defeat, occupation, liberation, and victory over Nazi Germany. Instead of focusing on the anecdotal and documentary significance of these journals, however, my book will a) explain how these writings cast a revealing light on the French cultural identity in the mid twentieth century, and b) indicate how these writers constructed their individual private lives in reference to the public story of their nation (and even to humanity in general) in its darkest hours in ways that are culturally, politically, and philosophically significant.

Key words: journal, WWII, France, narrative, history
Proposal Description

My project fits in the long term context of my research focusing on the narration of the past in France. I have co-directed seven NEH Summer Seminars on WWII France, and have published numerous articles and two books in this field. In 2004, I published my first monograph, *Through the Past Darkly: History and Memory in François Mauriac's Bloc-notes*. My recent articles deal with D-Day commemorations (no. 9 on cv), the conflicting memories of May 8-9, 1945 (no. 11 on cv), the evolving memory of the French Resistance (no. 12 on cv), the politics of memory (nos. 13, 14, & 15 on cv), the representation of history in Irène Némirovsky’s *Suite française* (no. 16 on cv), and the philosophical dimensions of Hélène Berr’s very personal confrontation with the violence of history (no. 17 on cv). In 2008, I completed my second monograph, *After the Fall: War and Occupation in Irène Némirovsky’s Suite française*, which is currently in press.

The tendency to frame key issues of the present in terms of some momentous past, and conversely, to analyze the past in terms of a contentious present continues to be a salient feature of French politics, society, and culture. In order to understand France, it is crucial to know how and why history keeps getting filtered into current events. Such is particularly the case with the WWII era, which continues at this very moment to be the subject of major television productions. In September 2009, the public channel France 2 aired a six-hour primetime feature *Apocalypse: la 2ème Guerre Mondiale*, while another lengthy feature program on the Resistance was broadcast in February 2010. A new film on the massive July 16-17, 1942 round-up of Jews in Paris conducted by French gendarmes at the behest of the Nazis is the subject of the large-scale production film *La Rafle*, which began playing in cinemas on March 10, 2010. Scholarly books, novels, and presidential proclamations have continued apace. As Henry Rousso has observed, the war years are a past that will not pass away, because they pose crucial questions of national identity, politics, personal ethics, and the relation of public affairs to private lives.

My new project will touch on all of these questions in order to produce a book on private journals telling various stories of history, ranging from their authors’ own experiences to reflections on the global conflict. Throughout the World War II era, many French people chronicled the vicissitudes of their own lives while at the same time reflecting on the momentous upheavals of the time. My book will explain how these writings, which up until now have been largely neglected, provide a set of uniquely valuable insights into the French experiences of defeat, occupation, and liberation. But instead of focusing on the anecdotal, I will analyze the ways in which journal writers frame public and private issues in terms of events past and present.

Chapter 1, ”Timely Meditations: The Method of Discourse,” will explore the powerful interpenetration of history and literature. These wartime writings did not just spring up out of nowhere, but were produced in a highly literary culture. From the royal courts of the Middle Ages to the ”Republic of Letters” in the early twentieth-century, France had perhaps more than any other nation attached public and institutional honors, prestige, and privileges to the act of writing. Canonical writers such as Montaigne, Pascal, Rousseau, and more recently Valéry and Gide provided venerable models for the practice of inventorying personal experiences, thoughts, moods, feelings, travels, and observations, while at the same time relating these subjects to the language, letters, political figures, and institutions of the French nation. The act of writing, even if to journal one’s private life, has thus always had important relations with and implications for the public arena. Such is the case with Hélène Berr’s *Journal*. Written in Paris during the
darkest moments of the German Occupation, but only published in 2008, Hélène Berr’s Journal provides dramatic testimony and striking insights into the sinister events of 1942-1944. The young Jewish student at the Sorbonne lucidly records the tragedy of the Holocaust unfolding all around her, while at the same time reviewing her own experience of the arrests, deportations, and executions of friends and family members among the Jews and resisters targeted. In the article (#17 on cv) just published in Modern & Contemporary France in February 2010, I show how her journal parallels Descartes’s methodical doubt while at the same time pointing to Emmanuel Lévinas’s notion of ethics grounded in intersubjectivity. Beyond its documentary value, Hélène Berr’s Journal thus takes on significant philosophical dimensions. This first chapter, “Timely Meditations: The Method of Discourse,” will therefore analyze the various ways in which Hélène Berr and other writers understood their private lives and personal prerogatives against the backdrop of the collective trauma occasioned by the catastrophic fall of France, the humiliating Occupation, the euphoria of Liberation, and the shock of the Holocaust.

Chapter 2, "Ethics and Poetics of History in Everyday Life," will point out that keeping a journal of wartime experiences constituted an intensely personal enterprise. Since, as Sartre points out, Nazi and Vichy propaganda had imposed a veritable "Republic of Silence" on public discourse, each and every unfettered exercise of thought and language represented a precious reaffirmation of the "Republic of Letters." Amid the conformism, rumor, and sententious propaganda that dominated the French media under the Vichy regime, Léon Werth approaches his Occupation Journal as an intellectual expression of psychological integrity and intellectual acuity. Similarly, Jean Guéhenno sees his journal as an antidote to Vichy propaganda. As a brilliant young Jewish student at the Sorbonne who finds herself branded and excluded by the imposition of the yellow star, and who sees friends and family arrested, interned, and deported, Hélène Berr writes not only in order to testify to such crimes, but also to record her intense, if highly contingent and fleeting, experiences of beauty and love against a backdrop of violence and death. It has long been a commonplace to invoke Theodor Adorno’s dictum that "after Auschwitz, it would be barbaric to write poetry" as a caveat against the supposedly nefarious effects of aesthetics that might risk masking or dissipating the historical reality of the Holocaust. And yet from the very outset, when Hélène Berr relates her excitement over an autographed message from Paul Valéry, to the most somber moments marked by the ongoing arrests and deportations of friends and family, she continues to note the beauty she finds not only in the urban landscapes of Paris seen at various moments of the day and in various seasons during her frequent walks in the city, but also in the music she plays with friends and in the works of literature that she continues to read and contemplate. I will explain why, far from any sort of “illusion” or “escape,” Hélène’s willful exposition of aesthetic pleasure constitutes an indispensable component of her writing, as she continues to affirm her own considerable intellectual capacities while at the same time probing the increasingly sinister events that she knows to be threatening her very existence.

Chapter 3, "Facing the Nation," will analyze how various perceptions of history informed journal writers’ sense of national sentiment and personal identity. The vast majority of French people in the 1930s and 1940s had been taught to consider French history as the sacred patrimony of the nation, one that had taken the various regional and social fibers and woven them into a tapestry that embodied the France's character as seen in its social, cultural, political, and intellectual habits. Such was the history of Ernst Lavisse and Ernest Renan, the master narrative that had been diligently taught to French schoolchildren from the days of Jules Ferry in the 1880s as a
means of binding together the various regions and socio-economic segments of the population by giving them a sense of common origins and purpose. In the wake of a devastating defeat, however, it was not clear in what form the French nation would continue to exist, if at all, in a new Europe that appeared to be irreversibly under Nazi control. That is why both Marshal Philippe Pétain in Vichy and General Charles de Gaulle, who headed up the Free French in London, so ardently spoke of preserving "La France éternelle." That is also why journal writers questioned themselves so insistently on what it really meant to be French not only in the domains of politics and culture, but also in their daily dealings with each other and with the hundreds of thousands of German soldiers that were parading up and down streets, settling in cafés and restaurants, and even pulling up a chair at the dinner table in the houses that German officers had requisitioned for their lodging. The brutal reality of the German occupation thus called French cultural and political identity into question. Chapter 3, "Facing the Nation," will thus assess what it meant both in the concrete reality of everyday life as well as in written intellectual pursuits for these journal writers “to be French” in the context of the war and the Occupation.

Chapter 4, "Making Sense of History," will study the notions of history operative in wartime journals as crucial not only for recording of personal observations from one day to the next but also for making sense of the ominous and often confusing events of the war. For these journal writers, the sense of history as a legacy, but also as a highly contingent Hegelian "prose of the world" being composed under their very eyes was all the more acute during World War II. If history was seen as the ongoing march of human events, it was also a tumultuous process leading in an unknown direction. For intellectuals such as Guéhenno and Werth, the Occupation represented the crossing of a desert. They as others were witnessing the death of an era, possibly the demise of an entire civilization, and the highly uncertain beginning of a new age. With the violent passing of the old in defeat and unsettling advent of the new under enemy occupation, they situated themselves with respect to what they saw as the legacy of the past and elaborated their ethics in relation to the ongoing process of contemporary events. This last chapter will explain not only why they provide exceptional insights into the French experience of the war but also how they situated themselves and their nation within the ongoing adventure of humanity while elaborating public and private ethics.

The Occupation Chronicles will therefore analyze how journal writers constructed their individual private lives in reference to the public story of their nation in its darkest hours in ways that are culturally, politically, and philosophically significant. My book will interest students and scholars of World War II and of contemporary France in general. The record shows that when given the time and funding, I produce published results. I have already received an NEH Summer Stipend for this project and have moreover published an article that will serve as the basis for chapter 1: “Des Considérations inactuelles au coeur de l'Occupation” (#17 on CV). I am well on the way to completing chapter 2, since I have just presented a lecture on Hélène Berr’s aesthetics at the Université de Paris III, Sorbonne Nouvelle. Over the summer, I will extend my analysis to other writers such as Simone de Beauvoir, Raymond Aron, Micheline Bood, and Roger Stéphane. The finished manuscript will then be submitted to a university press.