Holocaust denial, Le Vicaire, and the absent presence of Nadine Fresco and Paul Rassinier in Jorge Semprún’s *La Montagne blanche*

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Abstract
The importance to Jorge Semprún of confronting Holocaust denial in Vichy Syndrome France is not central to analyses that have been done of *La Montagne blanche*. To detect it, we must do what Semprún never stops asking readers to do: visit the external worlds to which his text directs us and reread his corpus so as to return with new insights and questions to pose to the text at hand. This essay examines *La Montagne blanche* in light of Semprún’s presentation of Jewish characters in *Le grand voyage*; his adaptation of Rolf Hochhuth’s *Le Vicaire*; his critique of the Communist party’s belated acknowledgment of the gulag; his relationships to the Holocaust denier and severe critic of the Communists at Buchenwald, Paul Rassinier, and to Nadine Fresco, the most penetrating analyst of Rassinier; and his attention to Holocaust denial when he wrote fiction rooted in historical situations. Holocaust denial is an erasure. *La Montagne blanche* draws our attention to that erasure in a novel in which the subject is hardly mentioned.

Keywords
Jorge Semprún, Paul Rassinier, Holocaust Denial, Vichy syndrome, Nadine Fresco

The importance to Jorge Semprún of confronting Holocaust denial in Vichy Syndrome France is not central to analyses that have been done of *La Montagne blanche* (1986). To detect it, we must do what Semprún never stops asking readers to do: visit the external worlds to which his text directs us and reread his corpus so as to return with new insights and questions to pose to the text at hand.

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Ce que je pèse, Ulysse? Je pèse le poids de fumée de tous mes copains morts, partis en fumée. Je pèse le poids infime, infiniment lourd, de ma propre fumée.—Juan Larrea (Semprún, 1986: 106)
With this in mind, we will examine *La Montagne blanche* in light of Semprún’s presentation of Jewish characters in *Le grand voyage* (1963); his adaptation of Rolf Hochhuth’s *Le Vicaire*; his critique of the Communist party’s belated acknowledgment of the gulag; his relationships to the Holocaust denier and severe critic of the Communists at Buchenwald, Paul Rassinier, and to Nadine Fresco, the most penetrating analyst of Rassinier; and his attention to Holocaust denial when he wrote fiction rooted in historical situations. Holocaust denial is an erasure. *La Montagne blanche* draws our attention to that erasure in a novel in which the subject is hardly mentioned.

*La Montagne blanche* tells of three men—Antoine de Stermaria, Juan Larrea, and Karel Kepela—who spend a weekend together in Normandy in April 1982 with Antoine’s wife and Juan’s lover, Franca Castellani, and Juan’s current girlfriend, Nadine Feierabend. The occasion is Franca’s fortieth birthday, which is also the date that Antoine and Juan met 40 years before. Juan is a Spaniard who was a resister in France deported to Buchenwald. He is now a successful playwright, but his subject is not Buchenwald, about which he rarely speaks. Nadine offers a key to understanding Juan and his memory of Buchenwald. Going where she takes us opens up new ways to interpret Semprún’s oeuvre.

**Nadine Feierabend**

Like the other women in *La Montagne blanche*, Nadine Feierabend exists not on her own, but as an incarnation of women who bring together Juan and Antoine. Nadine resembles Mary Lou, Antoine’s girlfriend 40 years earlier, whom, in an act of “complicité fraternelle” (Semprún, 1986: 242), he offered to Juan the day they first met. Nadine is Franca’s age when Franca met Juan. Juan ran into Nadine at a party to which he had gone hoping to see Franca, but she was not there. As part of his courtship, Juan gave Nadine the same tour of Madrid as he had given Franca; he makes sure Franca knows this by sending a postcard of Joachim Patinir’s painting “Le passage du Styx” at the Prado. While the other characters are living the possibilities and disappointments of their past lives, Nadine is not given a past beyond the fact that members of her Polish Jewish family were victims of the Holocaust. She is the least developed character in the novel. Juan suggests that he does not tell Nadine of his own time at Buchenwald because her family’s history would make this difficult for her (Semprún, 1986: 37). However, Juan is clearly attracted to a woman connected to the camp experience, but who appears oblivious to his past, so he does not have to talk to her about it.

Juan regards Nadine primarily as a sex object and intends to keep it that way. The night Juan met Nadine, he tells her that Feierabend means the end of the work day, “soir de loisir”, which he takes as an invitation and begins immediately referring to her in sexual expectation as Feuerabend, “soirée de feu” (Semprún, 1986: 40–41). Nadine will evoke as desire the past that haunts Juan. “C’est précisément pour sortir de l’oubli, de cette longue et douloureuse maladie de l’âme, qu’il avait choisi la jeune femme. Obscurément, sans l’avoir prémédité, c’est pour revivre son ancienne mort qu’il avait choisi pour compagne de voyage cette jeune Juive” (Semprún, 1986: 104). In the Semprún corpus, she is the only Jewish woman with whom a central character has a romantic relationship. Juan sees her body through the experience of the Holocaust. He strokes “la morbidesse de la face interne de l’avant-bras’ and imagines the number tattooed on her arm. When Nadine is getting dressed, she exhibits ‘son corps glorieux de jeune Juive après la honte et le massacre.’ But Juan “ne voyait que cette image atroce, dérisoire: des femmes nues, tondues, rasées, courant dans la boue vers un bâtiment trappé, au fond, sous le regard hilaire de quelques gardiens S.S.” (Semprún, 1986: 168–169). However, it is one thing for Juan to see death in her; when she mentions family members who died in the Holocaust, it ruins for him their vacation together in Portugal. (Semprún, 1986: 96).
At one point, Nadine tells Juan about attending André Engel’s Holocaust spectacle *Dell’inferno*, starring Laurent Terzieff as a guide, in which the audience takes a train to go sit enclosed in an abandoned factory surrounded by barb wire. Juan recognizes that Nadine recounts the dramatic performance of *Dell’inferno* almost word-for-word from the review in *Le Nouvel Observateur* (Dumur, 1982; Semprún, 1986: 27–28). That he asks where are the crematoria and remembers the exact wording of the review suggests that he is drawn to the piece, while disparaging it, precisely because it evokes what he knows, but cannot put on stage or tell her.

*La Montagne blanche* is set in 1982, when the Vichy Syndrome recognition of French responsibility for participation in the Holocaust increased the audience for Holocaust denial and its leading purveyor, Robert Faurisson. The novel was published in 1986, a year when Valérie Igounet sees a new period in the history of *négressionisme* launched by the Historikerstreit in Germany and the embrace of Holocaust denial by Jean-Marie Le Pen, leader of the Front National (Igounet, 2000; Rousso, 2016). Nadine is writing a thesis to counter negationists and has published an article in *Esprit* alongside one on the same subject by Pierre Vidal-Naquet. Juan reads her work, and, drawing on the title of a recent article by the German intellectual Lothar Baier, suggests to her a title for this article which she chooses. When Juan does talk of his experience at Buchenwald one night during the weekend, Nadine realizes that Antoine and Franca know of it and she is shocked and infuriated that in the 6 months they have known one another, Juan had never told her that he was a survivor (Semprún, 1986: 251, 256).

Juan differs from other characters in Semprún’s oeuvre in that he practices “l’amnésie volontaire” (Semprún, 1986: 95). He says in 1982 that it has worked for twenty or even more years; this situates the period of Juan’s amnesia from the time that Semprún himself stopped practicing “l’amnésie volontaire” and wrote *Le grand voyage* (1963). Juan is the Jorge Semprún who did not write of Buchenwald until then, but cannot proffer work in the Communist underground to explain his silence. The night he spoke of Buchenwald that weekend, he came to feel as he did when he was waterboarded by the Gestapo after his arrest. But this time he truly does drown, carried away in the “flots” of the river Styx (Semprún, 1986: 263). Juan had seen the sign, “Jedem das Seine,” on entering Buchenwald; he left by throwing himself into the Seine.

**Semprún and Jewish experience in *Le grand voyage***

That Nadine’s family past attracts Juan is in line with the concern of Semprún’s narrators with the experience of Jews facing the Holocaust, beginning with *Le grand voyage*. In this novel, the deaths we learn about at Buchenwald are not only of Russians and political prisoners, but of Polish Jewish children as well. The narrator Manuel takes it on himself to tell their story, because no one else can or will (Semprún, 1972: 192–197).² Soledad Fox Maura criticizes Semprún for making the inscription at the gate of Buchenwald, “Arbeit Macht Frei” (at the conclusion of this account of the death of these children), for this was what those who entered Auschwitz, not Buchenwald, saw (Fox Maura, 2017: 72–74). She is correct, but Semprún’s mistake is in keeping with the massacre of the Jewish children as the most horrific act we see in *Le grand voyage*. When Buchenwald is presented more fully in *Quel beau dimanche!* (1980), Semprún corrects the sign to “Jedem das Seine,” to each his own, an implicit recognition in the context of his initial error that Jews and resisters had their own camps (Semprún, 1991: 134).

In each of his works, Semprún places a personage who allows him to reflect on the situation of the Jews (Semprún, 2010: 192). Hans is a German Jew in *Le grand voyage* who takes on the identity of a French non-Jew resister to assure that if the Germans kill him, it will not be as a Jew. But equally revealing are the French Jews in their relations with non-Jews in France. In *Le grand
voyage, Semprún recognizes that the ways supportive non-Jews dealt with Jewish oppression during the war could be problematic. Manuel’s schoolmate Bloch is upset when the other students at Lycée Henri IV wear yellow stars in solidarity with him: being a Jew with the persecution this entails is not a question of what one wears. Bloch repudiates Manuel’s effort to share in the experience and thinking that this would help Jews (Semprún, 1972: 213–215). However, in this pre-Vichy Syndrome era, when Le grand voyage was published, non-Jews could imagine they aided Jews, but that the Jews do not remember this. During the war, Manuel sees a woman he thinks is Jewish on the street in Paris who “cherchait une réponse urgente à quelque question essentielle dans les yeux des passants.” Manuel wants to be the one she asks and he is. He walks the woman to her friend’s house. She says that it is better to have someone help you than to do something by yourself. The woman recognized that he had wanted her to speak to him and he thanks her. But when he sees her later, with a tattoo from Auschwitz, she cannot remember him. She says that she is Jewish and no one ever helped her (very unlike what Manuel realizes had been his experience as a resister before his arrest and in Buchenwald). Manuel tells her that if she cannot remember him, then he had not seen her (Semprún, 1972: 104–115). Semprún much later explained in a manner consonant with the “Jewish memory” phase of the Vichy Syndrome that he invented this conversation “in order to bear witness to what is historically true: that Jews had this experience of utter loneliness and abandonment” (Semprún, 2007: 167–168).

At the Formentor prize ceremony for Le grand voyage in 1963, Semprún is given a book with blank pages (in place of a Spanish translation); he says he will write in it the story of Jerzy Zweig, a Jewish boy the Communists saved at Buchenwald (Semprún, 1996a: 354–355; Chaout, 2016: 39–40). But he never does. In La Montagne blanche, Juan asks, “Quand nous serons tous morts, y croira-t-on encore?” (Semprún, 1986: 38) Much later, Semprún recognizes that the deported Jewish children, like those sent at the end of the war from Auschwitz to Buchenwald, and saved by the Communist-led camp resistance, are likely to be the last camp survivors and he reverses the story and entrusts it to them to include the deported resisters like himself in their presentation of the memory of the camps (Semprún, 2010: 321–322).

Juan remains distant from such thoughts. He can fantasize about Nadine in the camps, but does not tell her that he knew and that he helped Jews during the war, although this is clearly an important element for Semprún’s other survivor characters. Does Juan fear that telling such stories to a Jew born after the war, who does not feel helpless, will not elicit the reaction other leading characters in Semprún’s works sought? In the “Jewish memory” phase of the Vichy Syndrome, Nadine struggles against the refusal of some French to recognize the Holocaust, the end point of the blindness to French complicity in the genocide. Juan imagines Nadine as a victim with a number tattooed on her arm, but faced with a Jew and a woman who is a fighter against those who would deny the Jewish experience, he has trouble dealing with her as more than a pretty young thing.

Le Vicaire

In 1963, shortly after publication of Le grand voyage, Semprún performed the dramatist’s role given to Juan Larrea in La Montagne blanche. He adapted for the stage in Paris Le Vicaire, Rolf Hochhuth’s condemnation of Pope Pius XII for his silence in the face of Nazi persecution of the Jews. Semprún particularly appreciated and centered his adaptation on Hochhuth’s “rigueur méthodique” and the play’s “aspect agressif, provocateur, comme si on traitait les éléments d’un dossier d’accusation.” Semprún and the director focused attention on Hochhuth’s text, spurning presentation on stage of what Pius XII had not wanted to see. “On a évité,” said Semprún, “les pièges du naturalisme: il ne s’agissait pas de reconstituer le camp d’Auschwitz, ou bien un four
crématoire, comme à Londres, ou de faire des projections cinématographiques trop insoutenables” (Zand, 1963: 17). Semprún refused the spectacle of Dell’ inferno that Nadine Feierabend would see two decades later.

For François Azouvi, “Le génocide n’entre pas dans l’espace public français en 1961, avec le procès Eichmann,” but with the production of Le Vicaire, where the theatre was the site of nightly battles in 1963–1964 between far-right Catholics and the police (Azouvi, 2012: 186). Semprún asked if the play “suffira à déclencher la conscience des Français” (Zand, 1963: 17).

What made Semprún particularly sensitive to the failure to recognize and act upon the Holocaust was his nascent criticism of the Spanish Communist party for its subservience to the Soviet Union, on the eve of his exclusion. Semprún tells of being deeply affected when he read about the Soviet gulag in Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich when Le grand voyage was published, the very time he was working on Le Vicaire (Semprún, 1991: 384). Semprún saw his adaptation of the play as more than a denunciation of the Pope or of the Germans:

au fond, nous sommes tous coupables, témoins, juges et accusés dans ce procès, accusés de ne pas avoir voulu savoir. Dès 1942, il y avait assez d’éléments. Ce n’est pas une excuse de ne pas savoir. Nul n’est censé ignorer la loi, nul n’est censé ignorer les massacres…. Le mécanisme de ne pas savoir, c’est le mécanisme de la parfaite mauvaise foi; c’est le même pour le fascisme, la bombe atomique, l’Algérie, le prix de la vie, les salaires (Zand, 1963: 17).

Still in the party, Semprún referenced Communist parties and their silence on the gulag by not speaking their name. In the program, Semprún said that he was not a Christian like Hochhuth so “le silence de Dieu, le silence de son Vicaire, ne me scandalisent pas…. ne me concernent pas,” just as Hochhuth might have said of the Soviet Union and of Stalin. But, Semprún went on to say

à l’intérieur de cette pensée chrétienne, il y a une question capitale qui me concerne: la question d’un conflit entre un appareil de pouvoir et un engagement total humain de la justice. Conflit qu’on peut aisément transposer dans d’autres situations, d’autres appareils, conflits typique de notre temps qui dépasse de beaucoup la personne même de Pie XII (Semprún, 1963–1964: 4).

Perhaps this was not the place to confess, and Communists confess differently, through self-criticism, but Semprún recognized that he had lived and accepted the “appareil de pouvoir” of the Communist party at the time it was turning a blind eye to the gulag.

In 1964, the year Semprún was step by step heading to expulsion from the Spanish Communist party, he could make the transposition he referred to in the program of Le Vicaire. All could denounce the gulag now, but confronting their willful ignorance of it at the time it had existed was a different matter. When the Union des étudiants communistes asked Semprún to speak, he told the congregation to repent: “nous sommes tous co-responsables” for the crimes of Stalinism: “Il y a toujours le moyen de savoir, ou tout au moins de mettre en question. Nous avons trop dénoncé les démarches de la bonne conscience, de la mauvaise foi, à propos de l’extermination des juifs, des guerres coloniales, par exemple, pour pouvoir revendiquer, à notre profit, les excuses de ces mécanismes mystificateurs.” What he had intimated earlier, he said clearly now. The failure to know and to denounce the Holocaust was linked for Semprún to the failure to know and to denounce Communist crimes. Pope Pius XII and Communists around the world had turned a blind eye to crimes against humanity as they were being perpetrated so as to have no reason to act. Communist acknowledgment not just of the gulag, Semprún believed, but that Communists had denied the Stalinist crimes as they occurred, was necessary to build a new future. The party
needed to turn the act of “nier” on all within itself that had made this denial possible: “Nous ne pouvons pas refuser ce passé. Nous pouvons le nier, c’est-à-dire, le comprendre jusqu’au bout, pour en détruire les survivances, et pour mettre en œuvre un avenir qui lui soit radicalement différent” (Semprún, 1965: 36–37). Perhaps Semprún felt in 1964 that this was something the party could do, but recognizing the Holocaust at the time or later is what the defeated Nazis and their fellow travelers would never do. Semprún believed that Holocaust denial—the effort to make disappear the Nazis’ fundamental act, the effort to make the Jews disappear—demanded a response.

Nadine Fresco

Names are important in La Montagne blanche. Karel Kepela had been dismissed from his job for giving his dog the name of a hero of the Czech Resistance. When he goes to New York in April 1982 to discuss a film project, he is assigned a libidinous young American assistant to look after him, Milena Jesenská. She shares the name of Kafka’s love who died at Ravensbrück (and whose death Nadine talks to Juan about). Two weeks later, Kepela catches his girlfriend of 15 years spying on him. She is the mistress of Karel Sabina of the Czech intelligence service. Karel Sabina shares the name of a famous 19th-century Czech left-wing nationalist intellectual who was a police informer for a dozen years.

Nadine Feierabend has a cognate in contemporary France, a Dopelgänger like those who appear frequently in Semprún’s fiction, beginning with the characters who were imprisoned in Buchenwald and who fought in and with the Communist party, who turn up with different noms de guerre in many of his novels. Nadine Fresco is a scholar born after the war to parents of Ottoman Sephardic and Latvian Ashkenaze ancestry. She is not of Polish Jewish origin, like Nadine Feierabend, but she worked with Claude Lanzmann in filming Shoah in Poland. She lost family in the Holocaust, including a sister who died in 1943 and of whom she long remained ignorant (Fresco, 1985: 142). In June 1980, Fresco published in Les Temps modernes what Valérie Igounet calls “la première réflexion” on Faurisson’s Holocaust denial. Vidal-Naquet read the essay in manuscript before writing his own article, which appeared 3 months later in Esprit (Igounet, 2000: 268). Vidal-Naquet praised Fresco’s “courage” as a researcher (Dosse, 2020: 410). Lothar Baier read Fresco’s essay and asked to meet her while he was doing research for the article to which Juan refers in La Montagne blanche (Fresco, 2008: 142). Fresco and Baier became friends and she wrote the postface to his Un Allemand né de la dernière guerre when it was published in France in 1985. Just as Juan changed the name Feierabend to Feuerabend the first night he met Nadine, Semprún changed the name and the details of Nadine Fresco’s life in transposing her to Nadine Feierabend. Examination of Nadine Fresco takes us where Juan hesitates to go—to his experience at Buchenwald.

Paul Rassinier

Postwar youth who chose radical politics at the time that Semprún was leaving the Communist party fascinate him. Netchaïev est de retour (Semprún, 1987) is the story of 68ers who find success in the capitalist world they once opposed. But not all could settle for les hiers qui déchantent of the Mitterrand presidency. Elements that came out of the extreme left like La Vieille Taupe embraced the idea of the Italian Marxist Amadeo Bordiga that a focus on the Holocaust fueled an antifascism which dulled workers’ combativeness by differentiating a “good” non-fascist capitalism from a “bad” fascism, when, in fact, capitalism of any sort is the true enemy. Pierre Guillaume, Serge Thion and others in La Vieille Taupe saw the antisemitic far right as more likely to overthrow
capitalism than the socialist and communist left. Holocaust denial became central to their political project of destroying the existing order (Fresco, 1989: 179–182; Yakira, 2012: 1–62).

Nadine Fresco had known Serge Thion since she was young and says that she would not have taken an interest in Holocaust denial without the shock of learning that someone she had liked and believed she knew well, had embraced it (Fresco, 2008: 199). Thion was an aspiring intellectual, who had himself once collaborated with Vidal-Naquet in anti-Apartheid work. Fresco’s article in *Les Temps modernes* was, in Vidal-Naquet’s words, “ironique à souhait”; he sees her “ridiculiser plutôt que de refuter” the negationists’ position (Vidal-Naquet, 1998: II, 271). This infuriated Thion, desperate not to be shown up by a woman he considered his intellectual inferior. If her article attracted attention, Thion could not help claiming some of the credit, saying that he had directed Lothar Baier to Fresco (Thion, 1993: chap. 1, note 74). Drawing on his long acquaintance with Fresco, Thion made an *ad feminam* attack. Unlike him, she did not pursue the doctorate that Semprún has Nadine Feuerabend writing. She is a young woman who latches on to prominent older men—“elle se fit égérie de la vie Parisienne”—a description that could fit the Nadine Feierabend who sidles up to Juan at the party where they meet in *La Montagne blanche* (Thion, 1999). Neither Thion nor Juan have a place for the biting irony, the piercing self-examination, or the political commitment of Nadine Fresco.

For avowed leftists to embrace a far-right ideologue like Holocaust denier Robert Faurisson was problematic. La Vieille Taupe much preferred talking up and republishing the works of the negationist Paul Rassinier, who had a better pedigree from their perspective. Pierre Guillaume discovered Rassinier shortly after his death in 1967. The school teacher Rassinier was a Communist for close to a decade before being expelled in 1932. After a short, troubled period of cooperation with Boris Souvarine, Rassinier joined the Socialist party and was active in a faction led by Paul Faure that opposed preparation for war. During the Occupation, Rassinier initially affiliated with socialists who pledged allegiance to Pétain. However, he eventually joined the Libération-Nord resistance movement, where he remained true to his pacifist beliefs by engaging only in nonviolent actions. Rassinier was arrested, tortured, and sent to Buchenwald in January 1944 and from there to the Dora camp, which had the reputation of being particularly harsh. He arrived at Dora in March 1944 and remained until liberation in April 1945. On his return, Rassinier ran for office as a Socialist, but when he lost, he left the party and turned to anarchism and devoted himself to an increasingly strident denial of the Holocaust. His past in the Communist and Socialist parties and anarchist movements, the Resistance, and the concentration camp made him particularly appealing to La Vieille Taupe.

Rassinier wrote a memoir of his camp experience, *Passage de la ligne*, which appeared in 1948. Two years later, he published *Le Mensonge d’Ulysse*, a critique of survivors’ accounts. When Rassinier was at Dora, he had met Jircszah, a Czech lawyer and adjoint to the mayor of Prague, who served as an interpreter and lived with the other prisoners who held positions of authority in the camp hierarchy. However, he did not think highly of his fellow prisoner functionaries, a sentiment Rassinier shared. Jircszah told Rassinier that concentration camps were not unique to the Nazis—the Babylonians had such camps as did the French for Spanish republicans and the Soviets for political prisoners. This made sense to the anarcho-pacifist Rassinier: all states exploited their populations and the wars they fought accentuated the phenomenon, so there was nothing unique to the Nazi camps. When prisoners returned from the camps, like Ulysses in the *Odyssey*, Jircszah said they would seek glory and exaggerate and embroider stories of their experience to achieve it (Rassinier, 2018: 95–96).¹⁰

Rassinier had his truth to tell and set out to reveal what he saw as fabrications in other survivors’ accounts. He too wanted recognition, but refused to damn the Germans like others who wrote about their camp experience. His griefs were with other prisoners. Although Rassinier was evaluated as a
invalid on his return and was never able to work again, he presented himself as having had a remarkably good situation at Dora. He traded a portion of the food he received in packages sent by his wife to get six stays of a total of 8 months in the hospital, where he was spared the grueling labor for which Dora was known. Rassinier also spent several months as the butler for the SS officer in charge of the canine corps, a job limited to duties like making the officer’s bed and shining his boots.

Rassinier explained that the camps were built by the Nazis before the war “dans un geste de mansuétude” to protect prisoners from assaults by the public on enemies of the people and to “régénérer les brèbis égarés et les ramener à une plus saine conception de la communauté allemande” (Rassinier, 2018: 97). However, the war placed strains on operations, and the S.S. turned over elements of the management of Buchenwald to criminals and then to political prisoners, the Häftling-Führing, a term Rassinier seems to have invented to parallel SS-Führing. Nothing, Rassinier believed, prevented the prison functionaries from running the camps in the idyllic ways in which the S.S. depicted them to the public, except their dedication to looking out for themselves.

Rassinier said that the Communist-led political prisoners had not defeated the criminal prisoners to take control of the camps, as they claimed, but were given control by the S.S. who saw that they would make better prison wardens than the criminals. After the war, others questioned the Communist prisoners’ exercise of power at Buchenwald, but few took it to the extremes that Rassinier did. The political prisoner functionaries fostered subservience to the S.S., he said; they were collaborators, like Pétain. Rassinier dismissed the idea that the political prisoner functionaries treated prisoners any better than had the criminals who held these positions. They took care of their own and were driven by greed and privilege, not ideology. This explained the renowned inefficiency of camp operations. The mortality rate at the camps was high, but, Rassinier affirmed, the vast majority of the deaths were the result of abuse by the prisoner functionaries. He singled out the incompetence of the office staff of the Arbeitsstatistik as responsible for the legendary long roll calls at which prisoners dropped dead. Rassinier made light of the armed uprising organized and led by the political prisoner functionaries at Buchenwald when the camp was liberated.

From his conversations with the S.S., Rassinier presented a sympathetic picture of them. In public, they were brutes, but as individuals, they were “agneaux,” respectful and intimidated by the educated like himself (Rassinier, 2018: 162). The S.S. rarely appears in his account of the nitty gritty of camp life. As far as Rassinier was concerned, he would rather be governed by the S.S. than prisoner functionaries. He later criticized trials of individual S.S., saying that the Communist functionaries who ran the camps were responsible for the abuses there.

In no camp, Rassinier asserted, did the Germans set out to exterminate prisoners. Stories about gas chambers used to kill large numbers of people were untrue. Such fables, like those told of German atrocities during World War I, were dangerous because they could create the climate for a new war. The villains were not the Nazis for trying to exterminate the Jews, but the Jews, for saying that the Nazis had. If a few individual S.S. working with prisoner functionaries did perhaps send a few prisoners to their deaths in the gas chambers used for delousing, this had nothing to do with genocide, was not the work of the S.S. itself and was not done in obedience to orders from above. Passage de la ligne focuses on denunciation of the political prisoners who held positions within the camp hierarchy, but in Le Mensonge d’Ulysse, Rassinier devotes significant attention to questioning the existence of gas chambers, a position he developed in subsequent works. It would be Holocaust denial that won the returned Ulysses, Rassinier, the attention he craved.
Fresco, Semprún, and Rassinier

While Semprún was writing *La Montagne blanche*, Nadine Fresco began devoting herself to a study of Rassinier. She published *La Fabrication d’un antisémite* in 1998 (Fresco, 1998). It joined Florent Brayard’s *Comment l’idée vint à M. Rassinier*, published 2 years earlier (Brayard, 1996). Brayard does close readings of Rassinier’s political odyssey and his negationist writings to trace the origins and development of his denial of the Holocaust. Fresco takes a different approach and delivers a telling blow to Rassinier and his legacy. For her, Rassinier’s thought does not deserve the attention Brayard gives it. Fresco focuses on Rassinier the individual, precisely what his partisans like Guillaume and Thion valued. In a deep dive into Rassinier’s life in the territory of Belfort, she analyzes the “fabrication d’un antisémite” in the interwar years. Readers marveled at the length—close to 800 pages—she went to skewer Rassinier, but Fresco wanted to show the world, starting with Thion and his acolytes, that Rassinier’s Holocaust denial was itself the fabrication of an antisemite. He was an ever-disappointed militant driven by resentment, a mediocrity prone to revising important elements of his life story in his quest for the recognition he could never attain. In this sense, Rassinier was a true “révisionniste,” the term that Holocaust deniers in France take pride in calling themselves. His fabrication of his self was of a piece with that of Holocaust denial. Fresco does not engage with Rassinier’s arguments about the falsity of the myth of the Holocaust, but with the falsity of the myth of Rassinier as a persecuted truth seeker to which Holocaust deniers of la Vieille Taupe clung. Semprún understood and appreciated Fresco’s critique of Rassinier, because, unlike Rassinier, he never stopped making the same type of challenge to himself in his creation of characters like Juan, who have had experiences like his, but whose fabrications or inability to fabricate, the reader is asked to recognize and judge.

Rassinier and Semprún followed parallel paths. Both were resisters who were captured and tortured. They were in the same convoy to Buchenwald that arrived at the end of January 1944; their prisoner identification numbers were not far apart (Sellier, 1998: 184). They were in the quarantine block at the same time. Rassinier was permanently disabled when he returned, but began writing about his experience within a few years. He did not present himself as traumatized by the deaths of those around him in the camps; he was solely concerned with damning the Communist-led prisoner functionaries and condemning Jews for generating hatred of the Germans with their talk of the Holocaust.

Semprún never questioned the genocide of the Jews. He had been a Communist political prisoner functionary at Buchenwald and did not waver in his defense of the actions of Communists in the camp, even after he left the party. They looked out for the Communists and other resisters in the camp, with the goal of saving an elite of revolutionaries to act in the postwar world. While they necessarily carried out S.S. orders, they did so with less brutality than the criminals had. Semprún never renounced his time at Buchenwald working in the Arbeitsstatistik, the office that kept track of individual prisoners for the S.S. and selected those who would be sent to the harshest work camps like Dora. Rassinier considered the Arbeitsstatistik personnel privileged and was disgusted that scribes like Semprún could make decisions where to assign inmates based not on their skills, but in order to protect Communists and other resisters and some Jews as well. Semprún did not suffer long-term physical consequences from his torture or time at Buchenwald, but he was traumatized by the suffering and death he saw. He only began writing about it 15 years after his liberation.

Rassinier’s denial of the Holocaust drew on what he claimed were inaccuracies in survivors’ accounts. However, when he turned to his personal experience, he made the kind of errors he finds inexcusable in others. Rassinier claims to have been beaten at Buchenwald by the German Communist leader, Ernst Thaelmann, an event that fit well with his identification of the
Communists as the source of mistreatment of the prisoners. Semprún criticizes Brayard for analyzing this incident in terms of Rassinier’s “psychologie infantile” and only mentioning in a footnote that the encounter could not have occurred, because Thaelmann was never interned at Buchenwald. Such analyses display Brayard’s “aveuglement méthodologique.” “En vérité,” Semprún laments, “le travail de la mise en perspective” of the information Brayard provides, “c’est le lecteur qui devra le faire.” Fresco is this reader. She shows that the untruths like this that characterize Rassinier’s tellings of his life are in line with his untruths about the Holocaust (Rassinier, 2018: 92–93; Brayard, 1996: 46; Semprún, 1996b; Fresco, 1998: 514). Just as Rassinier says that errors in details in other survivors’ accounts lead him to disbelieve them as a whole, Semprún focuses on this passage because it allows him to critique all that Rassinier has to say about political prisoner functionaries in the camps. He condemns Rassinier in terms like those Rassinier uses for political prisoner functionaries, saying that “dans cet enfer, il s’était aménagé un petit paradis de servitude,” that assured he would not understand what went on around him (Bermond, 1996).

In La Montagne blanche, Semprún does not speak of Holocaust denial, but Kepela (and Josef Klims, another Czech intellectual) treat Stalinist trial transcripts as Fresco did the work of Holocaust deniers in her essay in Les Temps modernes, revealing the impossibilities in their evidence and logic in an ironic way (Semprún, 1986: 110–116). Well into the 1980s, Semprún was primarily concerned with another form of negationism—that of French intellectuals who at first denied and later downplayed or refused to confront what the existence of the gulag revealed (Semprún, 1991: 144–146). However, Semprún had been aware of Holocaust denial before he began writing in the early 1960s and spoke of it frequently, particularly in the decade after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and passage the following year of the Loi Gayssot, which prohibits Holocaust denial. Fresco presents a character study that explains what led Rassinier to adopt, promote, and fixate on negationism. This was something that Semprún had long thought about as well:

Avant d’écrire Le grand voyage, j’avais peu lu sur les camps, mais j’avais lu certains écrits révisionnistes, et j’ai continué plus tard, à mesure qu’ils paraissaient. J’ai un contentieux direct, personnel avec Rassinier, parce qu’il se trouvait à Buchenwald à la même époque que moi. Je peux démontrer que cet homme qui critique les témoignages est un faux témoin du début à la fin sur Buchenwald (Semprún, 2000: 11–12).

Semprún was not absent from Rassinier’s world either. Semprún’s first extended treatment of the Holocaust was his adaptation of Le Vicaire in 1963. Rassinier condemned the play at the time as an effort to divide Europe along religious lines and drew on research in the papal archives for a book-length defense of Pope Pius XII; he admired the antiwar pronouncements of the pope, whom he termed the Jean Jaurès of the Second World War (Rassinier, 1965). And, in turn, when Pierre Guillaume met with Gérard Lebovici, director of Éditions Champ Libre, in 1977, to discuss the publication of a new edition of Rassinier’s Le Mensonge d’Ulysse, Semprún sat in on the meeting. He said nothing, but dissuaded Lebovici from the venture. Three years later, a disappointed Guillaume let it be known to readers of La Vieille Taupe that Semprún had just published Quel beau dimanche! “dans lequel le grand bourgeois stalinien révéla pour le grand public, ad usum Delphini, en l’é dulcorant, en minimisant, et en falsifiant l’interprétation, ce qu’avait révélé Rassinier sur la vie interne des camps et le rôle des staliniens” (Guillaume, 1995).11 Rassinier’s acolytes decried Semprún as Semprún and Fresco denounced Rassinier.

The Limits of Artifice

Rassinier is never absent from Semprún’s oeuvre. He is present not as an individual, but as a super-ego for Semprún, who drew his subjects from his own life and believed that the artifice of fiction
was essential to convey the truth of life as a Communist and resister in France, Buchenwald, and Spain, and the subsequent traumas he experienced: “j’ai toujours le sentiment que la vérité a parfois besoin d’un peu d’artifice pour être crédible, vraiment vraie” (Alliés, 1994: 24; Semprún, 1991: 357; Semprún, 1996a: 165–167, 217, 262). Semprún presented his decision to write his first account of deportation, *Le grand voyage*, as a response to listening to the Mauthausen survivor Manuel Azaustre tell his story without artifice:

> I will always defend the legitimacy of literary fiction in expounding historical truth. In the case of deportation, both Jewish and non-Jewish, it is simply not possible to tell, or write the truth. The truth we experience is not credible, and this is a fact that Nazis relied upon in terms of their own legacy, for future generations. If we tell the raw, naked truth, no one will believe us. This is why I mentioned Manolo [Manuel] in that Madred apartment. He was telling the raw truth, which was incomprehensible because it was bereft of verisimilitude. It needed to acquire a human shape, an actual form…. And I believe ardently that real memory, not historical and documentary memory but living memory will be perpetuated only through literature. Because literature alone is capable of reinventing and regenerating truth (Semprún, 2007: 168).

In response to Claude Lanzmann’s rejection of any use of fictional detail in recounting the Holocaust, Semprún said of the witnesses in *Shoah*: “Lanzmann’s film is also fictional. It takes place years later, and people are telling their stories with the measure of artifice it necessarily entails” (Semprún, 2007: 184).

Yet, Semprún recognized the possibility that “les témoignages peuvent céder à la tentation de l’exagération homérique” and the need to convey the truth of the trauma without resorting to the lies of Ulysses (Semprún, 2000: 11–12). Writers cannot choose their readers and Semprún wrote knowing that disciples of denial could be among them. Semprún was well aware of “la méthode du négationnisme, que Paul Rassinier a en quelque sorte inaugurée. Méthode qui se fonde sur une critique des témoignages d’anciens déportés, en relevant ici ou là une exagération ou une invraisemblance—quasiment inévitables dans cette mémoire de l’horreur difficile à dire—aussi utiles utilisées pour tout remettre en cause” (Bermond, 1996). Semprún believed that he had control over the artifice he used in writing, but the spectre of Rassinier’s votaries set limits on Semprún the artist: “Mais je me serais refusé d’inventer le juif moribund qui chante le Kaddish. La technique des révisionnistes est de critiquer la véracité de témoignage. Je n’invente donc rien qui peut transformer la vérité de l’expérience” (Portevin, 1995: 12). He claimed to have always done this, “Mais l’apparition du négationnisme n’a fait qu’en renforcer la nécessité” (Conan, Gonin, et al., 1995); “Mais j’ai une limite, une limite absolue: ne jamais faciliter le travail des critiques négationnistes. Chaque mot est pesé afin que l’on ne puisse pas, sous le prétexte que tel ou tel est faux, remettre en cause la vérité de l’ensemble de mon témoignage” (Rencontre, 1998: 39).

Concern with Holocaust deniers’ readings inhabited and perhaps inhibited Semprún’s writings on Buchenwald and the trauma of its memory, but Semprún could write in other registers when he did not feel the need to use artifice. Semprún may himself have required the artifice of Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* in 1963 to confront viscerally the gulag which he had known of since David Rousset’s revelations in 1949 and Nikita Khrushchev’s “Secret Speech” in 1956. However, Semprún’s own accounts of the Spanish Communist party leadership and its policies are factual in nature, because he believed that this was a more effective way of countering the denials and mistruths he saw at work in the leadership’s recounting of its past and his past: “il n’y a pas un nom qui soit faux, on n’a pas pu me démentir sur un fait. Il y a un effort de vérité historique” (Alliés, 1994: 26). Rather than a traumatic event that those who did not
experience it will need literary artifice to grasp, Semprún made the case against the party in historical narratives. He knew how dangerous verisimilitude could be when an event itself was made a spectacle, unlike the Holocaust or the concentration camps which were kept veiled by the Nazis. The show trial in 1952 of Josef Frank, the Czech Communist at Buchenwald whom Semprún knew was innocent, but did not defend at the time, was “une oeuvre de fiction, où ce qui compte n’est pas la vérité, mais la vraisemblance” (Semprún, 1991: 45).

Conclusion

In his adaptation of Le Vicaire, Semprún addressed denial of the Holocaust as the Holocaust was being perpetrated. Confronting Rassinier, he moved to denial of the Holocaust after it had occurred. Both engagements called up his history in the Communist party: the critique of the party leadership for its silence in the face of the gulag in Le Vicaire; and, in criticizing Rassinier, Semprún’s defense of the participation of the Communist party, including himself, in the operation of Buchenwald. This is why Semprún pays such attention to Jews saved by the Communists at Buchenwald, both those that he saved by using his position in the Arbeitsstatistik to exchange their identities with those of non-Jews, and Jews who came to Buchenwald from the extermination camps, who were saved by the Communist-led Resistance, among whom were Elie Wiesel and Imre Kertész (Semprún, 1991: 254–259; Semprún, 1972: 116–117; Semprún, 2013: 41; Combe, 2014, 269–277). In their relation to the Holocaust, the Communists at Buchenwald are the opposite of the pope depicted in Le Vicaire. They did not ignore genocide; they acted. In L’écriture ou la vie (1994), Semprún speaks for the first time of the German Communist Jürgen Kaminsky at Buchenwald taking him to hear a Sonderkommando from Auschwitz tell of the gas chambers and the Holocaust. In doing so, Semprún produces a witness who can contest Holocaust deniers’ claims (Semprún, 1996a: 73).

Juan, Nadine Fresco, and Serge Thion claim Lothar Baier as their own, but Baier could speak for himself, saying of La Montagne blanche that in comparison to Semprún’s earlier works, “the analytical sharpness has given way to an academically saturated tone of conversation” (Baier, 1988:6). Or is the analytical sharpness different and does the literary artifice in which it is presented take new forms? The reader can see Nadine Feierabend as a young woman and a Jew not like those who appear elsewhere in Semprún’s works. Semprún felt that “les experts” want there to be no survivors (or to say that the “vrais témoins” are the dead), so no one will challenge them (Semprún, 2001: 172–173). Yet Nadine Feierabend is an “expert” that Juan invites into his life. However, she is not an expert of the sort that Semprún resents. Nadine does not realize that Juan had been in Buchenwald. Readers must become the expert she is not. They can follow Nadine Feierabend off the page to Nadine Fresco and from her to Paul Rassinier and his denial of the Holocaust and condemnation of the Communists at Buchenwald, and end with Semprún’s rejections of both positions. Semprún and Rassinier are intertwined figures whom Nadine Feierabend brings together. She combats Rassinier’s denial of her history, but in so doing she unintentionally leads Juan to confront his own past. If Semprún sees artifice as necessary to present the unpresentable to those who were not present, it can also work to shield the teller. When Juan does speak of Buchenwald to Feierabend and his friends, he does it without the artifice necessary to make the telling tolerable, to protect himself.

Readers are not told what Juan says or feels about his camp experience beyond the way the smoke from power plants reminds him of the crematorium at Buchenwald. As Colin Davis and Elizabeth Fallaize recognize, “La Montagne blanche narrates that [Juan Larrea] narrates, but not what he narrates. The account of Buchenwald remains a hole in the text, an absent cause, or an
abyss into which all else falls.” (Davis and Fallaize, 2000: 70). What is drawn to this black hole? Denials of the Holocaust, as well as assessment of the Communists’ activities at Buchenwald, are subjects which the reader can rescue from the black hole of La Montagne blanche only by engaging in a dialogue with Semprún’s oeuvre, in an intertextuality and extratextuality of the unspoken and the spoken.

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Notes
1. My thanks to Nicole Bauer for her research assistance and to the anonymous readers for their perceptive comments.
2. On this story as a “pivotal… event in the narrative,” see Tidd, 2014: 135.
3. Sonia Combe analyzes the story of Jerzy Zweig (Combe, 2014).
4. See also (Semprún, 1963:2) and (Olivier, 1963).
5. Names in La Montagne blanche are akin to other “games” Colin Davis and Elizabeth Fallaize see in the novel (Davis and Fallaize, 2000: 71).
6. Vingt ans et un jour (Semprún, 2004) offers a more anodyne transposition. Michael Leibson is clearly drawn from the well-known American historian of the Spanish Civil War, Gabriel Jackson, with whom Semprún had worked in his film Les Deux mémoires.
7. Fresco is a sensitive analyst of those like herself born to survivors of the Holocaust in the first years after the war. In their families, they learned as children to live with (and therefore without) the unsaid in the family’s traumatic past (Fresco, 1981). Fresco’s insights suggest why, if she is a model for Feierabend, that Feierabend could be such an astute observer and investigator of all, including Juan’s cloistered wife, except the repressed traumatic camp experience of Juan, a man of her parents’ generation.
8. Baier’s article “Die Weisswäscher von Auschwitz” appeared in Trans-Atlantik in 1981.
9. On Bordiga and his influence in France, see Lindenberg, 2004.
10. In his account of Auschwitz, If This Is a Man, Primo Levi quotes Ulysses from Dante’s Inferno (Canto 26: 119–120) to a prisoner functionary who has befriended him, as Jircszah befriended Rassinier, to say that camp inmates can and must resist dehumanization. Although Ulysses is in the eighth circle of Hell for deceit, he is the truth teller in the camp for Levi—“you were not made to live your lives as brutes, but to be followers of worth and knowledge”—not Jircszah’s fabulist who will emerge from the camp to tell lies (Levi, 2015: I, 108).
11. Guillaume understood the value of presenting Rassinier in this manner. Even Vidal-Naquet, Rassinier’s most severe critic, characterized Le Mensonge d’Ulysse in “Un Eichmann de papier” (1980) as “excellent comme témoignage de l’auteur sur ce qu’il a vécu, intéressant quand il critique les autres témoins de Buchenwald et de Dora et met en lumière les responsables de l’appareil politique dirigé principalement par les déportés communistes.” (Vidal-Naquet, 1987: 26–27).
12. However, Semprún presents the Kaddish being said in Hebrew in Netchaïev est de retour, (Semprún, 1987: 50) and in Yiddish in L’écriture ou la vie (Semprún, 1996a: 46), when, in fact, the Kaddish is in Aramaic. On this issue, see Fox Maura, 2017: 223.
13. Kaminsky was a composite character (Semprún, 2001: 184) The witness is likely Janda Weiss, whom Eugen Kogon, a doctor at Buchenwald, cites as his source for information on Auschwitz and whose existence and account Rassinier doubts (Kogon, 2006: 233–234; Rassinier, 2018: 245–246).

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