

**The 993rd Man:
Quantitative History and the Shoah**

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By using statistics to study the attitudes of Jews in the face of persecution in the French town of Lens between 1940 and 1944, two historians offer a quantitative sociological analysis of the victims' trajectories. This original approach paves the way for a social history of genocide.

Reviewed: Nicolas Mariot and Claire Zalc, *Face à la persécution. 991 Juifs dans la guerre*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 2010, 302 p., 23,90 €.

Autumn 1940: the first statute on Jews, the census of Jews in the northern zone, the internment of “foreigners of the Jewish race,” and the first expulsions from the professions. June-July 1940: the second statute on Jews, the extension of quotas and expulsions from the professions, a new census, and the Aryanization of companies. Spring-summer 1942: curfews and wearing the Star of David required of the Jews, a schedule imposed on shopping, frequent roundups, and Jews handed over to the Germans. The Jewish community in Lens (3% of a population of 33,000 in the 1930s) is hit with full force. Before the persecutions began, the town's Jews faced several options, which Nicolas Mariot et Claire Zalc carefully retrace: embark on a new exodus; return to Lens (henceforth located in a “forbidden zone” for refugees); declare oneself a Jew; stay and get on with one's work (but at what risk?); sell one's capital holdings (but to whom?); or flee (but by splitting up from one another? And where could one go?). These questions, which confronted each of the 991 Jews living in the Lens coal basin in 1939, were nothing less than matters of life or death.

Family Configuration and Odds of Survival

Mariot and Zalc do not regard these dilemmas as primarily psychological phenomena. Rather, they approach them as choices dependent not only on the particular contexts in which

they occurred, but also on the social and demographic characteristics of those who made them: profession, family configuration, and the structure of group affiliations. Here lies the book's originality and undeniable achievement: by using statistics to explain circumstances that we usually associate with the singularity of suffering, Mariot and Zalc offer an innovative approach to understanding the Shoah, while at the same time expanding their conception of social history and its methods.¹ Precedents for this kind of approach are indeed rare. Drawing data from 36 towns, researchers in the Netherlands tried to explain the weak survival rate of Dutch Jews (27%) compared to Jews residing in France (75%).² In 1997, a special edition of the journal *Le Mouvement social* offered the first sophisticated statistical foray into a related field, the social history of the resistance.³ For the Jewish community in Lens, Mariot and Zalc's findings are decisive and will undoubtedly inspire further research.

The first important finding concerns the impact that a family's social and legal status has on the decision to stay or flee and, indirectly, on the odds of survival. During the May 1940 exodus, local dignitaries and prominent citizens were the first to leave Lens. Yet during this first year, few French people left, as if they felt protected by their nationality. Poles, however, were overrepresented among early departures. Over time, the profile of these émigrés changed. In 1942, 37% were children, compared to 24% in 1940. Similarly, 45% were French, where only 19% had been in 1940. Nationality had lost its protective quality.

As danger grew, women and the most vulnerable residents began to flee. However, the larger the household, the greater the likelihood of remaining in Lens. During one's flight, isolation played a protective role. Conversely, when one considers the number of arrests, it appears that dense kinship networks could be a burden. One could generalize this insight to conclude that whereas in peacetime, family connections can be an asset (notably for Jewish immigrants), they become, in times of danger, a liability, as instances of separation suggest.

¹ See respectively Nicolas Mariot, "Faut-il être motivé pour tuer ? Sur quelques explications aux violences de guerre," *Genèses* 53, December 2003: <http://www.cairn.info/revue-geneses-2003-4-page-154.htm>; François Buton, André Loez, Nicolas Mariot, and Philippe Olivera, "1914-1918: understanding the controversy," *Books & Ideas*, June 11, 2009: <http://www.booksandideas.net/1914-1918-Understanding-the.html>; Claire Lemercier, and Claire Zalc, *Méthodes quantitatives pour l'historien*, Paris, La Découverte, "Repères" collection 2008; as well as a review of the book on *La Vie des Idées*: <http://www.laviedesidees.fr/L-historien-et-les-chiffres.html>

² See, notably, "The Holocaust in the Netherlands and the Rate of Jewish Survival," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 20, 3, winter 2006, pp. 474-499.

³ *Le Mouvement social*, 180, July-September 1997 (edited by Antoine Prost).

The second set of findings concerns deportation and execution. Of the 991 Jews studied, 487 (49%) were arrested between 1941 and 1944; 47% were deported, i.e., far more than the national average (25%); in 1945, 528, or a little more than half, were still alive. At the national level, the deportation rate was 17% for French Jews and 43% for foreign Jews. In Lens, these rates were, respectively, 35% and 59%, which suggests that nationality still offered protection, but less than the national average. Can deportation be correlated with choices that people made in 1940? If the decision to report to the census can be explained sociologically (young people who are single, spatially isolated, and born in France report less frequently than others), census reporting and deportation are nonetheless independent phenomena. Finally, of the 108 Jews from Lens who were registered and held at Auschwitz, 84% died (in contrast to those who went immediately to the gas chambers, for whom the mortality rate was, by definition, 100%). Among those whose date of death is known, a quarter died in the first month and 85% by the end of four months. Only three survived longer than a year.

A Qualitative Study

The use of interviews, private archives, and numerous institutional archives (ranging from the departmental archives of Pas-de-Calais to the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, by way of the federal archives in Bern) gives the study a more “qualitative” character. Reconstructing networks of acquaintanceship, family trajectories, and the variety and complexity of individual itineraries makes it possible to study the Shoah “from below.” Leaving aside escape narratives, which allow one to follow individuals from Lens to any number of villages in the free zone or along the Swiss border, three paroxysmal moments stand out as particularly intense: the 1940 census, the Aryanization of property, and the roundup of September 11, 1942.

The Pas-de-Calais departmental archives have preserved the self-declarations of Jews during the 1940 census. They testify to the doubt, ignorance, indifference, and ultimately shifting and inscrutable identities of the people to whom the census directed its violence. Some described themselves as of “Jewish nationality,” others of “Jewish descent”; one engineer described himself as “more French than Jewish”—so many ways of recusing one’s affiliation with the targeted “Israelite religion” (the departments of the North and the Pas-de-Calais, which fell under the Lille branch of the German military government in Brussels, had

been subject since 1940 to a definition that was more religious than racial in character, unlike the Nuremberg and Vichy laws).

While inhabitants of Lens managed to save Jews, others proved themselves cunning profiteers. During the Aryanization process, neighboring business owners, who were often in competition with the victims, bid for available property and adopted a predatory attitude. For instance, in 1943, an agent for the Prisunic company complained to the General Commissariat for Jewish Affairs that the Nobal store, which was located in town and owned by “notorious Jews,” had yet to be Aryanized.

The September 11, 1942 roundup, during which some 230 people were arrested in Lens, dealt a terrible blow to the community. Despite a lack of archives and testimonials, the authors establish, through comparisons with other roundups in the same region, that nearly all of seventy police officers from the Lens commissariat were mobilized alongside the *Feldgendarmarie*. After a stopover in Lille, the deported, on September 15, 1942, left Mechelen on train X for Auschwitz. The day after the roundup, men from the commissariat sealed the doors of those who had been deported. They did not forget to harvest the vegetables from the newly abandoned “Jewish gardens”: hundreds of kilos of potatoes, carrots, beets, and turnips were handed over to the Lens hospital. Abandoned homes were occupied for personal use by the Germans and local police officers. The commissariat moved its offices to Litwak’s apartment on Rue Pasteur. Here as elsewhere, the book’s microhistoric focus illustrates the genocidal logic in the most minute of details.

From Detection to Self-Identification

How the logic of identification works is one of the first questions that Mariot and Zalc address. “Who is Jewish?,” the authorities ask in 1940. Who is Jewish, even though they think they are not? Who will be spared? How does one detect and formalize this “trait” within a socially and legally differentiated group of people? True, the Lens Jewish community was quite homogeneous. The Jews of the Lens coal basin were mostly stationary or travelling merchants in the clothing industry and the leather and pelt trades (though a few were miners). They were overwhelmingly new arrivals. 80% had not been born in France. Their community life was characterized by zeal and traditionalism, so much so that their coreligionists in Paris, Lille, or Belgium describe them as “crude bumpkins.”

Consequently, to identify the Jews, the newly established authorities initially resorted to a strategy based on a logic of “public notoriety.” When the latter proved inefficient, they began soliciting self-declarations, after announcing the obligation to report oneself to the census. While the first list for the Béthune arrondissement, drawn up on December 11, 1940, consists of 203 names, the call for self-declarations led, in early 1941, to the registration of 482 individuals.

Around this time, a woman wrote to the Béthune sub-prefect to explain her reticence. She acknowledged being of “Jewish origin,” but, she protested, she was born French of French parents, her father had been a volunteer in 1870, her husband in 1914, and her son in 1939. “I thus come to you to ask, *monsieur le sous-préfet*, if, with all these French qualities, I must be classified among the Jews who are currently being investigated.” Such reasoning shows the extent to which the pre-war “Israelites” had internalized the dichotomy, which was central to French law, between citizens and foreigners, which in this instance dovetails with a more sociological distinction: on the one hand, French citizens of the Jewish faith or culture, emancipated by the Revolution, deeply patriotic, and replete with “French qualities”; on the other, the *Ostjuden*, immigrants seeking employment or refugees fleeing state anti-Semitism in their homelands—in other words, “the Jews who are currently being investigated.” By shedding light on French Jews’ own self-representation, the letter is highly revealing.

And so is the authorities’ answer, which arrived a few days later. “[Because you were] born, as you yourself declare, to parents of Jewish origin, you belong to the Jewish race.” Consequently, the petitioner had to declare herself to the Lens town hall. As this case demonstrates, the bureaucracy was completely indifferent to logical clarity. The lists drawn up between 1940 and 1941 have a catch-all quality, as the pseudo-criteria laid out in the Jewish statutes were driven by little more than anti-Semitism. The woman thus learned, to her misfortune, that a rationality to which she was not accustomed had just been put in place: a Jew is a Jew, regardless of patriotic sentiment and assimilation. The process of extermination begins, in Lens like elsewhere in Europe, with the designation of the future victims.

What is a “Jew from Lens” ?

Mariot and Zalc prove that it is possible to undertake a “sociologically informed analysis of behavior” during a genocide and especially during a war. Because of its

quantitative focus, the identification of the cohort—in this case, around a thousand people spread across the Lens coal basin, from Béthune to Valenciennes—is the investigation’s crucial task. From a methodological perspective, the fundamental question is not so much “how did the Lens Jews experience years of persecution?,” but “what is a ‘Lens Jew’?” This is precisely the question the Nazis themselves were led to ask. On this issue, the authors are understandably prudent, as the lists they consider mix Israelites with eastern Jews, solidly bourgeois Frenchmen with Poles from the *shtetl*, the orthodox with atheists, and children with adults for the purpose of deporting them to the death camps. In a way, the documents themselves are traps.

The vague and arbitrary process of identification broke with the culture of the French Third Republic, whose “categories [were] ‘verifiable’ because they were objectified by years of republican practice.” This brings us back to an older debate, launched by Michael Marrus and continued by Gérard Noiriel. In *Les Origines républicaines de Vichy (The Republican Origins of Vichy)* (1999), Noiriel shows how the Vichy regime inherited republican techniques, notably in record-keeping and anti-foreigner discrimination. Yet Mariot and Zalc demonstrate that, in November-December 1940, the French administration did not use the foreigner files of the Lens commissariat, despite the fact that they were carefully kept, nor the naturalization documents used by the prefecture’s officials. They conclude that no connection exists between Third Republican practices and the Jewish censuses in the Pas-de-Calais.

Beyond Lens itself, it is necessary to recall that not only did the administrative personnel, the files, and the marking system remain in place after the 1940 defeat (particularly in Paris), but that, as early as spring 1938, the police prefecture introduced into its identification notes a very un-republican rubric: religion. And, based on the self-declarations of those concerned, the prefecture’s scribes wrote in the files the word “Israelite.” Naturally, the inquiry ended there or, rather, repression was channeled in a republican direction: lack of papers, violation of the May 2, 1938 law-decree against “undesirable foreigners,” etc. Between this date and the Vichy regime, the same people were documented and jailed and the same police officers were monitoring them. One can thus say that the foreign Jews living in France faced increasing repression *beginning in 1938*; in the case of Jews of Polish origin, who were numerous in Lens, one can even begin two full decades

earlier, the pogroms of 1918-1919 being followed by policies that were increasingly openly anti-Semitic during the thirties.⁴

To identify the cohort of “Lens Jews of 1939,” the researchers had three choices: to use the community’s sources, which are primarily religious and social, but which, regrettably, are closed to the public; the onomastic method, which the authors reject on the grounds that there are no exclusively Jewish surnames; and the use of lists of Jews drawn up during and after the war. In their scrupulous “methodological conclusion” (*retour sur enquête*) Mariot and Zalc explain in depth how they constituted their database. In the lists drawn up during the war (for persecutory ends) and after the war (for reparations or memory), 926 names are mentioned at least once. To these names they add 65 “unidentified and undeclared” victims—in other words, Lens resident who were unknown to the authorities “as Jews,” such as family members whose names were found in naturalization files or in testimonials from Yad Vashem.

Like any methodology, this one has its limits. The authors modestly recount how, at the end of their investigation, a 992nd man appeared: Joseph Strohs, an Austrian football player who belonged to the Lens Racing Club in the thirties and was imprisoned in a French concentration camp in September 1939, appeared on no list of Jews drawn up during the war. To further lengthen this list of 991-plus-one Jews, one could also consult the National Security (*Sûreté nationale*) archives, an immense file system for tracking foreigners (and others). The files extend from the date at which the individuals entered France until the late thirties or even 1940. If this research had proved fruitful, its results could be crosschecked with the 1936 population census, which the authors disregard because of their aversion for onomastics. Finally, it is possible to distinguish, among the Lens Poles who joined the armed forces on French soil in 1939, those who chose the Polish army-in-exile as opposed to those who preferred the Foreign Legion, the Jews preferring the latter on the grounds that the former was anti-Semitic.

Beyond the strictly archival stakes, these considerations risk provoking a debate that will be both heated and futile: not only did the Nazis themselves not know who was and was not a Jew—a question that set off a number of pseudo-debates during the Third Reich—but

⁴ See, notably, Pawel Korzec, *Juifs en Pologne. La question juive pendant l’entre-deux-guerres*, Paris, Presses de la Fondation nationale des Sciences Politiques, 1980.

ultimately no one knows. Those who feel themselves to be Jewish, today as yesterday, know that there are a thousand different ways to be “be Jewish.” To the question “what is a ‘Lens Jew’?,” the authors reply: an individual whom the authorities in 1940 considered as such, and whom they consequently strove to thrust into their death machine. This methodological choice is perfectly legitimate, especially when the outcome is a pioneering book with persuasive results, which points the way to a social history of the Shoah that has yet to be written.

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