

## ***Of No Interest to the Nation* by Gilbert Michlin<sup>1</sup>**

Reading Guide by Professor Marie-Paule Hervieu

Gilbert Michlin's book, *Of No Interest to the Nation: A Jewish Family in France, 1925-1945: A Memoir*. Leon Lewis, Trans. (Wayne State UP, 2004), recounts the story of the author's parents who, in order to flee antisemitic persecution in Poland, attempted to immigrate to the US, then chose to move to France in 1925. Their only son, Gilbert, was born in Paris on February 5th, 1926. He died in 2012.

### **Reading Guide**

#### 1) Introduction to the book

Rigorously precise and noteworthy in its documentation, Gilbert Michlin's book *Of No Interest to the Nation* is a family history of the author's Polish-Jewish parents' unsuccessful attempt to immigrate to the US and subsequent choice to immigrate to France in 1925, in order to flee the antisemitic pogroms in Poland<sup>2</sup>. Their only child, Gilbert, was born in Paris on February 5th, 1926.

Gilbert Michlin's father, Moshe-Meyer (Maurice) Michlin, a professor of Hebrew, worked as a fabric cutter for a hat manufacturer<sup>3</sup> and applied for his and his wife's naturalization in 1933. Their request was twice refused, once in 1936 and then again in 1939. The first police report of October 12<sup>th</sup>, 1933 cited the "reasoned opinion"<sup>4</sup> that "the present request holds no interest to the nation" (Michlin 37), even though his father and his mother Riwka (Renée) Dvoretzkaïa spoke and wrote several languages: Polish, Yiddish, German, Russian, and French.

The war and the German military occupation of France, as well as the rise to power of Philippe Pétain as head of the Vichy government,<sup>5</sup> would throw the life of the “assimilated” family into disarray. First, due to the antisemitic policies of the Vichy regime, in particular the Aryanization (government dispossession) of “Jewish” businesses, the Elina millinery was shut down and Gilbert Michlin’s father laid off. Consequently, he looked for salaried work in a *brasserie* or as a bespoke tailor. Then, in the spring of 1941, the Unemployment Commission<sup>6</sup> intervened and Moshe-Meyer Michlin was forced to accept work as a woodcutter in the work camp Belin-Joué in Gironde, 40 km south of Bordeaux<sup>7</sup>. “My father and his fellow workers were in charge of clearing the ground” (Michlin 43).

December 24th, 1941: Moshe-Meyer Michlin was interned by French *gendarmes*<sup>8</sup> acting under German authority at the camp Mérignac-Beaudésert<sup>9</sup> in the section reserved for foreigners (which contained 22 Jewish prisoners). On March 27th, 1942, after having been recruited by the intermediary organization UGIF<sup>10</sup> on behalf of the German business Ostland,<sup>11</sup> he was transferred to Bulson, in the Ardennes region<sup>12</sup>. There, he was arrested on January 5th, 1944, and held at Drancy,<sup>13</sup> then deported January 20th, 1944, on Convoy 66. At 47 years old, he was sent to the gas chambers because he was Jewish and wore glasses.

A month later, on the eve of Gilbert Michlin’s 18th birthday (the night of February 3rd, 1944), living without protection and unaware of Moshe-Meyer Michlin’s arrest, Gilbert Michlin and his mother were arrested in their home on Geoffrey l’Angevin Street<sup>14</sup> by French police and transported overnight to the police precinct at Place Baudoyer<sup>15</sup>. Gilbert, having been asked to retrieve two blankets, was escorted back to his house by a police officer. He could have escaped then, he was young (18 years old), and he had the opportunity, but the idea of leaving his mother behind as a hostage was unthinkable. He returned and they were deported from Drancy in

Convoy 68<sup>16</sup>, on February 10th, 1944. His 49-year-old mother was taken to the *Krematorium* of Birkenau.

## 2) Working as a deportee in the camps

In a very real sense, upon his arrival at Auschwitz on February 13, 1944, Gilbert Michlin began a descent into hell with the revelation of his mother's immediate murder and the first actions meant to strip him of his identity. Naked, his head shaved, branded with the number 173847, he overheard a detainee say that to survive, he needed a useful trade. His would be that of *Feinmechaniker*, a precision mechanic. He presented himself to the Siemens "employment" office,<sup>17</sup> took a professional exam, and was recruited. Transferred to Auschwitz-II Birkenau, he joined the Siemens *Kommando* and was assigned to Block 11, *Strafkommando*, known as the disciplinary squad. As such, he escaped the selection (for the gas chambers) and limited his exposure to physical abuse, all the while knowing that "those who were not gassed risked being killed within several weeks on the job" and that one had "to be strong, endure hunger, cold, suffering, and humiliation." The author notes that he was very quickly informed of the workings of the camp, of its internal hierarchy, even of the existence of "specialized" *Kommandos* like the "Canada"<sup>18</sup> or the *Sonderkommando*<sup>19</sup> because death was everywhere, omnipresent: "the smoke from the crematoriums was constantly present, along with the sirens signaling an escape and the display the next day at roll call when the fugitive, immediately caught, was hanged for all to see. This was enough to break our spirits and remind us of death, ever-present death that tangibly hung over our heads" (Michlin 81). He also witnessed the extermination of Czech Jews in March 1944,<sup>20</sup> followed by that of Hungarians<sup>21</sup> and Roma<sup>22</sup> while he was working from February to April 1944 on the construction of a Siemens factory several kilometers from Birkenau in what

would become the Bobrek camp. During this time, seven days a week, “the workers were awoken at 4:30am,” were counted and piled into trucks by 5:30am, marched to the construction site by SS officers with their dogs and were put to work, before being regrouped, counted again, and finally delivered to a supervisor, such as the leader of the Bednarek *Block*, for sundry chores, such as delousing.

From May 1944 onwards, he was interned in the small Bobrek camp of 300 prisoners where his living and work conditions changed, even improved in a way, because the production of unassembled kits for electric motors happened inside the factory, under the supervision of civilians, such as foremen and engineers,<sup>23</sup> and because he no longer had to work on Sundays. Nevertheless, the risk of being hanged for sabotage, following an intervention from the political police, remained. And the constant factors of the concentration camp system were still a threat to life itself: endless roll calls, abuse and punishment, hunger, extreme fatigue.

The Auschwitz camps and the prisoners of the Buna-Monowitz camp (part of the IG-Farben complex) were evacuated on the 17th and 18th of January 1945 ahead of the Soviet army’s arrival. As such, the concentration camp experience persisted in the form of “forced marches and death convoys” towards Gliwice<sup>24</sup>.

Rediscovered at Buchenwald<sup>25</sup> by the director of Siemens, Gilbert Michlin was transferred with his *Kommando* to Siemensstadt<sup>26</sup> in Berlin to work the night shift in a factory, until air raids forced his displacement to Sachsenhausen where he was integrated into a *Kommando* clearing rubble from buildings shelled by the Allies.

In April 1945, a final attempt to move the detainees to a less-exposed factory in Bavaria was brought to a halt in Dresden, a city razed by air raid bombings. He returned to Sachsenhausen and the rubble clearing *Kommando* in Berlin. On May 3rd, 1945, during a second death march

towards Lübeck,<sup>27</sup> Michlin was liberated near the city of Schwerin,<sup>28</sup> in the Mecklembourg-Poméranie-Occidentale region, located in the Soviet-liberated zone.

Returning home alone and unemployed after the death of his two deported parents, he found his apartment empty. But he kept his head down and rebuilt his life. With the help of a paternal cousin, he decided to immigrate to the United States, where he resumed his studies and became a mathematical engineer, working for IBM-Europe.

Gilbert Michlin was courageous enough to request a foreword from the historian Zeev Sternhell,<sup>29</sup> entitled “The War against the Enlightenment and against the Jews,” which reinserts a story of life and death into the long period of the history of ideas, and into the space of occupied Europe.

We keep the memory of this remarkable, endearingly modest man alive, in the hopes that what Zeev Sternhell describes as a “beautiful text, this precious and faithful testimony” will be perpetually disseminated.

***-Translated from the French and annotated by Somerset Grant, Scripps College.  
Edited by Julin Everett, Scripps College.***

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> All annotations are the original work of the translator. Quotations of Michelin's book are taken from the English publication, translated by Leon Lewis.

<sup>2</sup> After Poland gained independence in 1918, its borders encapsulated various ethnic groups. In response, nationalist and antisemitic sentiments led to violence in the streets and pogroms against Jews in 1918-1919 (Jean Yves, Potel. "Chronology of Mass Violence in Poland 1918-1948." Mass Violence and Resistance- Research Network, Sciences Po, [www.sciencespo.fr/mass-violence-war-massacre-resistance/en/document/chronology-mass-violence-poland-1918-1948.html#title0](http://www.sciencespo.fr/mass-violence-war-massacre-resistance/en/document/chronology-mass-violence-poland-1918-1948.html#title0). Accessed 29 Feb. 2024.)

<sup>3</sup> "Un coupeur de casquettes" is translated as "a fabric cutter for hats" on p.42 of the English translation of Michelin's memoir (Michlin, Gilbert. *Of No Interest to the Nation: A Jewish Family in France, 1925-1945: a Memoir*. Translated by Leon Lewis and Zeev Sternhell, Detroit, Wayne State UP, 2004.). This was an assembly-line role in a millinery factory, responsible for cutting fabric pieces from a hat pattern (See "[Recensement général des industries & des métiers](#)." Accessed 29 Feb. 2024).

<sup>4</sup> French policy in 1933 restricted immigration and naturalization of Jews, who were seen as an economic drain in a competitive job market and as "unassimilable" security threats (Maga, Timothy P. "Closing the Door: The French Government and Refugee Policy, 1933-1939." *French Historical Studies*, vol. 12, no. 3, 1982. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/286530>. Accessed 29 Feb. 2024). This is likely because they were stereotyped to be a nationless people, without loyalty to any country and therefore traitors to all nations (See <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/defining-the-enemy>. Accessed 29 Feb. 2024).

<sup>5</sup> Philippe Pétain was a World War I war hero and leader of collaborationist Vichy France.

<sup>6</sup> *Commissariat à la lutte contre le chômage*: government employment commission created in 1940 under the Vichy regime to contend with the issue of high unemployment rates among French nationals and immigrants (Maux-Robert, Marie-Antoinette. "Le Commissariat à la Lutte contre le Chômage en Zone Sud.", *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains*, vol. 206, no. 2, 2002, pp. 121-146. Cairn.Info, <https://www.cairn.info/revue-guerres-mondiales-et-conflits-contemporains-2002-2-page-121.htm>. Accessed 24 Feb. 2024).

<sup>7</sup> Bordeaux: a city in the south-west of France, about 580 kilometers from Paris.

<sup>8</sup> *Gendarmes* are French military police.

<sup>9</sup> Mérignac is a commune in the Gironde *département* and a suburb of Bordeaux. Mérignac-Beauesert was a small internment camp located there from 1939-1944 (See <https://muzeum.tarnow.pl/na-bister/en/merignac-memorial/>. Accessed 1 March 2024).

<sup>10</sup> *L'Union générale des Israélites de France* (UGIF) or The Union of French Jews, was a government agency responsible for organizing social welfare and employment for French Jews under the occupied and Vichy (collaborationist) governments (Grynberg, Anne. "Juger l'UGIF (1944-1950)?" *Terres Promises*, by Hélène Harter et al., Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2010, pp. 507-25. Open Edition Books, [books.openedition.org/psorbonne/43548](https://books.openedition.org/psorbonne/43548). Accessed 24 Feb. 2024).

<sup>11</sup> Ostland GmbH was a private land-management corporation that owned about 70,000 hectares (172,973 acres) of farmland in the Ardennes region (Mièvre, Jacques. "L'« Ostland » en France durant la Seconde Guerre Mondiale. Une Tentative de Colonisation Agraire Allemande en Zone Interdite" ["'Ostland' in France during the Second World War: the German attempt at agrarian colonization of the Forbidden Zone"]. *Études Rurales*, 1979, pp.170-71. Persée, [www.persee.fr/doc/rural\\_0014-2182\\_1979\\_num\\_73\\_1\\_2456\\_t1\\_0170\\_0000\\_3](http://www.persee.fr/doc/rural_0014-2182_1979_num_73_1_2456_t1_0170_0000_3). Accessed 29 Feb. 2024).

<sup>12</sup> Bulson is a commune in the Ardennes *département* in northern France, around 34 kilometers from the Belgian border.

<sup>13</sup> The Drancy transit camp was a temporary holding location for Jews rounded up in Paris, on their way to labor and extermination camps. It was located in Seine-Saint-Denis, a *département* and suburb of Paris (See <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/drancy>. Accessed 29 Feb. 2024).

<sup>14</sup> Rue Geoffroy l'Angevin is located in Paris' 4<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement*, near Le Centre Pompidou (the National Museum of Modern Art).

<sup>15</sup> Place Baudoyer is located in Paris' 4<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement*, 700 meters from rue Geoffrey l'Angevin.

<sup>16</sup> Gilbert Michlin and his mother were deported on convoy 68, which transported 1,502 individuals to Birkenau, of which 1,229 were gassed upon arrival. A total of 271 people were selected for forced labor. ("Transport 68 from Drancy, Camp, France, to Auschwitz Birkenau, Extermination Camp, Poland on 10/02/1944". *Yad Vashem*. <https://collections.yadvashem.org/en/deportations/5092639>. Accessed 22 June 2024. See also: Klarsfeld, Serge. *Le Mémorial de la déportation des Juifs de France*. Paris: Beate and Serge Klarsfeld, 1978.)

<sup>17</sup> Siemens is a German multinational technology corporation that was responsible for manufacturing electrical equipment during the war (See <https://www.siemens.com/global/en/company/about/history/company/1933-1945.html>. Accessed 24 Feb. 2024).

<sup>18</sup> *Kanada Kommando*: the group of prisoners responsible for sorting the goods confiscated from individuals upon their arrival at Auschwitz II-Birkenau (See [https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/album\\_auschwitz/kanada.asp](https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/album_auschwitz/kanada.asp). Accessed 24 Feb. 2024).

<sup>19</sup> *Sonderkommando*: the group of prisoners responsible for preparing new arrivals for the gas chambers and clearing the gas chambers of dead bodies and transporting them to the crematoria (See <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/sonderkommandos>. Accessed 24 Feb. 2024).

<sup>20</sup> From 1941 to 1944, German-occupied Bohemia and Moravia saw the deportation of Czech Jews first to the Theresienstadt ghetto and later to Auschwitz, where 86% of Bohemia's Jews were killed (See <https://www.archives.gov/research/holocaust/finding-aid/civilian/rg-84-czech.html> and <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-holocaust-in-bohemia-and-moravia>. Accessed 29 Feb. 2024).

<sup>21</sup> Approximately 440,000 Hungarian Jews were deported and killed (See <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/timeline-event/holocaust/1942-1945/deportation-of-hungarian-jews>. Accessed 29 Feb. 2024).

<sup>22</sup> Approximately 23,000 Sinti and Roma people rounded up from across Europe died in Auschwitz-Birkenau around 1943-1944 (See <https://www.auschwitz.org/en/museum/about-the-available-data/sinti-and-roma/>. Accessed 29 Feb. 2024).

<sup>23</sup> Bobrek was a sub-camp in the Auschwitz concentration camp complex. At first, prisoners were marched from Auschwitz camps (such as Birkenau, in Michlin's case) to the Bobrek worksite to construct a Siemens factory. From April 1944 onwards, they were interned at the camp and put to work producing parts for electric motors (See <https://www.auschwitz.org/en/history/auschwitz-sub-camps/bobrek/>. Accessed 5 May 2024).

<sup>24</sup> For more information on the evacuation of the camps and the industrial sub-camps under Auschwitz, see <https://www.auschwitz.org/en/history/auschwitz-sub-camps/monowitz/> (accessed 29 Feb. 2024). Gliwice (aka Gleiwitz) is a Polish town in which the forced marches converged and the prisoners were loaded into railcars heading west (See <https://www.auschwitz.org/en/history/evacuation/the-final-evacuation-and-liquidation-of-the-camp/>. Accessed 5 May 2024).

<sup>25</sup> Buchenwald was one of largest concentration camps within Germany (See <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/buchenwald>. Accessed 5 May 2024).

<sup>26</sup> Siemensstadt is a town in northern Germany, established on land purchased by a predecessor of the Siemens corporation. During the war, it was also the site of the Sachsenhausen concentration camp, the foremost camp in Berlin (See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siemensstadt> and <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/sachsenhausen>. Accessed 5 May 2024).

<sup>27</sup> Lübeck is a city in northern Germany, approximately 282 kilometers from Berlin.

<sup>28</sup> Schwerin is a city in northern Germany, approximately 69 kilometers from Lübeck and 213 kilometers from Berlin.

<sup>29</sup> Zeev Sternhell (April 10, 1935 - June 12, 2020) was a Holocaust survivor and preeminent scholar of 20<sup>th</sup>-century fascism in Europe (Roberts, Sam. "Zeev Sternhell, 'Super Zionist' Wary of Extremism, Dies at 85." *The New York Times*, 25 June 2020, [www.nytimes.com/2020/06/25/world/middleeast/zeev-sternhell-mideast-scholar-dies.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/25/world/middleeast/zeev-sternhell-mideast-scholar-dies.html). Accessed 5 May 2024).



