

## **Address delivered for the inauguration of a plaque commemorating H el ene Berr<sup>1</sup>**

### **-Marianne Job**

Unveiling of a plaque commemorating H el ene Berr, on October 2nd, 2015 at No.5  elis e Reclus Avenue in Paris' 7th *arrondissement*.<sup>2</sup>

### **Address delivered by Marianne Job**

It was in this very building, on March 8<sup>th</sup>, 1944, that, after an informant alerted the French police to their presence, H el ene Berr and her parents, Antoinette and Raymond Berr were arrested by police officers<sup>3</sup>. The arrest record noted: "arrived at the Paris prefecture jail at 12:30am, departed on March 9<sup>th</sup> at 3:00pm. Reason for arrest: Jewish. Destination: Drancy."

Raymond Berr, Executive Vice President of  tablissements Kuhlmann,<sup>4</sup> played an essential role in the development of the industrial chemical industry in France between the two world wars. First arrested June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1942 under the pretext that his yellow star was stapled instead of sewn on, he was detained at Drancy,<sup>5</sup> then released September 22<sup>nd</sup> by the German authorities, after a bail payment was posted by Kuhlmann. However, he was no longer allowed to fulfill his duties as a manager at Kuhlmann headquarters and he was limited to working solely from home, without contact with the public.

At the beginning of the war, H el ene lived with her parents in the family apartment. Her older sister Yvonne left Paris with her husband Daniel Schwartz, a professor in the unoccupied zone<sup>6</sup>. After receiving his Bachelor of Letters in Clermont-Ferrand and in Strasbourg, H el ene's brother, Jacques Berr, fled to Dordogne and lived under a false identity until the end of the war. Only her sister Denise lived with H el ene and their parents, until Denise's marriage to my father Fran ois Job, on August 12<sup>th</sup>, 1943.

In 1941, H el ene earned her Bachelors Degree in English from the Sorbonne and in June 1942, she earned her certification to teach university-level English language and literature, receiving a grade of 18/20 and the mark of distinction, “very good.” The anti-Jewish Vichy laws prevented her from taking the exam which would have allowed her to become a high school teacher or college professor<sup>7</sup>. Nevertheless, in October of the same year, she finished a PhD thesis project on the Hellenic inspiration in the poetry of Keats.

On April 7<sup>th</sup>, 1942, she began work on her *Journal*, writing about *la joie de vivre*,<sup>8</sup> her enchantment with nature, and her passion for literature and music, all of which coincided with her encounter and subsequent romance of several joyful and wondrous months with Jean Morawiecki, to whom the journal is dedicated. At the end of November 1942, he left Paris to join the French Liberation Forces,<sup>9</sup> heeding the call of General de Gaulle.

He would write on June 20<sup>th</sup>, 1945: “I am dedicating the little clarity of mind that I currently have to reading and rereading H el ene’s diary. These notes, these entries scribbled onto paper from April ‘42 to February ‘44 do not console me yet. Perhaps they will later on; then they will be a great comfort. For now, their beauty and their anguish only sharpen my awareness of the magnificence of a woman who no longer exists, whom I lost, whom we all lost. In her diary, beyond an acceptance of pain heightened by daily worries and unsettling premonitions, one finds an extraordinary wellspring of joy, especially at the beginning. Later, it is veiled by the horrors of life, but you can feel it ready to resurface after the storm, made even more poignant and divine by hardship. And all that’s gone. People like H el ene (I am not sure if there is anyone like her) are not islands of beauty and strength unto themselves. They share the meaning of beauty and give strength to those who know how to understand them. What she could have done, the feats she would have accomplished, this woman who was able to write these lines! For me, H el ene was

the symbol of the radiant power that is charm, beauty, harmony, conviction, confidence, and loyalty. Yet it has all been wiped away. With her, the woman I loved and even more, this soul that was so close to mine, is gone. What remains of those six months that we shared, and to which my memories return, haunting them as if they had lasted a century, though at the time they seemed to last only an hour? An indescribable fragrance that surrounds us, a hint of lavender, I believe...”<sup>10</sup>

Faced with the vise tightening around her— the wearing of the yellow star,<sup>11</sup> the June 1942 arrest of her father, then her fiancé’s departure and the marriage of her sister— H el ene abandoned all of her passions to dedicate the entirety of her time to saving children alongside her sister Denise, as part of the *Entraide Temporaire*<sup>12</sup> and of UGIF.<sup>13</sup> They worked to place the orphaned children of deported parents into the care of nannies.

During the last three months before their arrest, as the rumors of roundups grew increasingly menacing, the Berrs lived hidden in the homes of several people who risked their lives to take them in. However, one evening, tired of not being able to sleep in their own beds, the Berrs returned to their house. The next day, early in the morning (7:30am, to be precise), they were arrested. H el ene left a note about their arrest on a piece of blotting paper she tore off in haste. On May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1944, only several weeks after their arrest, their apartment was occupied by a couple who would flee upon the liberation of Paris, but not before stealing and vandalizing most of the furniture and objects left behind by the Berrs.

Deported with her parents on March 27<sup>th</sup>, 1944<sup>14</sup>, the day of her 23<sup>rd</sup> birthday, she alone would survive for another year. Evacuated from Auschwitz on October 31<sup>st</sup>, she arrived at the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp on November 3<sup>rd</sup>. Affected by the typhus epidemic raging through the camp, one morning, she could not get up for the roll call. Her fellow prisoners found

her savagely beaten by one of the guards. She died in early April 1945, just a few days before the British army liberated the camps.

In a letter dated July 6th, 1943, she wrote, “Unfortunately, I am going less and less to the Sorbonne. I have been adamant, however, about keeping my librarian position at the Institute for English<sup>15</sup> on Saturday afternoons, to stay in contact with this atmosphere that is so dear to me. This library is my sanctuary, as much as the banks of the Seine, the old houses along the river, the Latin quarter,<sup>16</sup> the weathered stones of Paris that will have known me throughout this whole dreadful period, and who in their centuries-long immutability are above all human vices, give me the impression that they love me, and that a secret tie binds us.”

Her wish was granted. Paris, her beloved city, is alive with her presence today: the Hélène Berr Multimedia Library on Picpus street in the 12th arrondissement,<sup>17</sup> a Hélène Berr amphitheater at the Sorbonne, and now this commemorative plaque outside the apartment where she lived with her parents, her brother, and her sister at No.5, Elisée Reclus Avenue. It is here that she wrote her *Journal* bearing witness to what she saw, for the whole world to know.

The opportunity to break the silence that she extended to me,<sup>18</sup> I now extend to all the young people whom I meet in high schools and middle schools. The *Journal* is a wonderful teaching tool that extends beyond the Holocaust to attain the universal. Active participation of young people of all ages, of all social and cultural backgrounds faced with this unprecedented tragedy, their involvement, their adhesion sometimes to the point of identification with the text is crucial for its dissemination. The literature and history teachers guiding their students through the reading are doing remarkable work, and I would particularly like to thank Geneviève Nakkache, Professor and expert in modern humanities at Victor Duruy High School, with whom

we organized many meetings at the high school and at Les Invalides<sup>19</sup> to have brought one of her classes here today. Their presence warms me; it is the best kind of reward.

I dare to hope that the passerby, upon reading this plaque, will discover this marvelous, gifted young woman full of promise that was stolen by cruelty, but whose words will leave a lasting impact in the hearts of each and every one. Since hers is a story of survival and perseverance, it is applicable to all of humanity.

Since the publication of the *Journal* in 2008, people of all ages, from all over the world have come to see the place where H el ene Berr really lived. I know that a small group of Germans came to leave a photo of the cover of the German edition of the *Journal* at the foot of the stairs inside, along with a votive candle.

The *Journal* today exists all over the world, having been translated in 26 different countries. As Patrick Modiano wrote in his preface, “H el ene Berr would have most certainly become an author, judging by the quality of her writing. With her luminous presence, she will contribute to perpetuating the memory of all those souls who, like her, continue to shine and will never again be extinguished.”

Thank you to everyone for being here to celebrate her memory,

“Never again”<sup>20</sup>

***-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.

<sup>2</sup> No. 5 Elisée Reclus Avenue is in Paris' posh 7<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement*, 250 meters from the Eiffel Tower.

<sup>3</sup> On June 2nd, 1941, the Vichy government passed the Second Law on the Status of Jews (law #2332), elaborating the definition in the categorization of Jews in both France and its colonies, and a companion law on the Compulsory Registration of Jews (#2333)--requiring those whom the state recognized as Jewish to declare themselves to their local prefects. These individuals were also required to provide their addresses. Both laws permitted the arrest and internment of Jews (See "Lois et Décrets". Journal Officiel de l'Etat Français, 14 June 1941, pp. 2475-76. Légifrance, [www.legifrance.gouv.fr/download/securePrint?token=P8mNk76ykr0jkMRyNzZD](http://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/download/securePrint?token=P8mNk76ykr0jkMRyNzZD). Accessed 22 May 2024). Although roundups, arrests and deportations continued at a steady pace through 1942 and 1943, some Jews evaded detection by leaving their homes and living with friends and relatives. Police raids continued through 1944 in an attempt to find those who had escaped the roundups.

<sup>4</sup> Établissements Kuhlmann (or simply, Kuhlmann) is a chemical manufacturing company, largely known for producing fertilizer at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (See <https://journals.openedition.org/cahierscfv/804?file=1>. Accessed 29 Feb. 2024).

<sup>5</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>6</sup> Daniel Schwartz's work as a professor is mentioned on p.300 of the journal (Berr, Hélène. *The Journal of Hélène Berr*. Translated by David Bellos, New York., Weinstein Books, 2008)

*Le zone libre* was the Southern and Southeastern region of France that was not under German occupation, but which was subject to the Vichy regime's collaboration with Nazi Germany (See <https://museedelaresistanceenligne.org/media6818-Carte-de-la-France-spare-par-la-ligne-de-dmarcation>. Accessed 22 May 2024).

<sup>7</sup> *Le concours de l'agrégation* is an exam that is part of the licensure process for becoming a secondary or higher education teacher at a public institution in France (See <https://www.devenirenseignant.gouv.fr/enseigner-dans-les-classes-preparatoires-au-college-ou-au-lycee-et-dans-les-etablissements-de-142>. Accessed 1 March 2024).

<sup>8</sup> "Joy of living" roughly translates to a sense of zeal and love of life (See <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english/joye-de-vivre>).

<sup>9</sup> The French Liberation Forces were a volunteer army organized under General de Gaulle, who was exiled in Britain at the time, with the mission of assisting the Allies in fighting back the German forces in France (adding to the work of grassroots Resistance movements taking place in France). (See <https://www.britannica.com/place/France/The-Resistance>. Accessed 1 March 2024).

<sup>10</sup> Jean Morawiecki sent Hélène a set of lavender soaps when he was stationed in Madrid in 1942-1943 (Berr 301).

<sup>11</sup> The Vichy French government mandated a yellow star to be worn by all Jews ages 6 and over, on June 7<sup>th</sup>, 1942. It was not only intended to humiliate, it facilitated surveillance and deportation (See <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/fr/article/jewish-badge-during-the-nazi-era>. Accessed 1 March 2024).

<sup>12</sup> *L'Entraide temporaire* was an aide organization active throughout the Occupation in the north of France, dedicated to hiding Jews. After the war, it also provided social services to orphaned Jewish children until they reached legal adulthood (See Domankiewicz, "Une Constellation dans la Nuit").

<sup>13</sup> *L'Union générale des Israélites de France* (UGIF) or The General Union of Israelites in France, was a government agency responsible for organizing social welfare and employment for French Jews under the Vichy (collaborationist) government (See Grynberg, *Juger l'UGIF*; Mémorial de la Shoah, "[Numérisation d'un fonds comprenant des courriers de déportés](#)"). Accessed 24 Feb. 2024).

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The Berrs were deported on convoy 70, which held between 1000 and 1025 individuals, of which 480 were gassed upon arrival. Five hundred and twenty-eight people were selected for forced labor, of which 152 returned from deportation. "Convoi 70 de Drancy, Camp, France à Auschwitz Birkenau, Camp d'extermination, Pologne le

27/03/1944”. *Yad Vashem*. <https://collections.yadvashem.org/>. Accessed 9 June, 2024. See also: Klarsfeld, Serge. *Le Mémorial de la déportation des Juifs de France*. Paris: Beate and Serge Klarsfeld, 1978.

<sup>15</sup> *L’Institut d’anglais* was the English language and literature department at the Sorbonne University before it was divided into three separate departments in 1969 (“[L’Institut d’Anglais de la Sorbonne a ‘éclaté’ en trois unités d’enseignement et de recherche](#)”, Archives of *Le Monde*. Accessed 28 March 2024).

<sup>16</sup> *Le quartier latin* is Paris’ 5<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement*, where the Sorbonne University is located.

<sup>17</sup> La Médiathèque Hélène Berr, rue de Picpus is in Paris’ 12<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement*.

<sup>18</sup> Mariette Job’s address contains the untranslated expression “tendre la perche à quelqu’un,” which denotes “coming to someone’s aid or saving someone from embarrassment, shame, or frustration”. It implies that Hélène aided Mariette Job in overcoming a difficulty, although this difficulty is not explicitly mentioned. In the context of this speech and in that of Mariette Job’s afterword in the *Journal*, I interpret the expression to mean that Mrs. Job felt saved from silence, shame, and bewilderment in the face of her family’s suffering, because of the inspiration she drew from Hélène’s magnanimous actions and eloquence (Berr 306).

<sup>19</sup> Les Invalides is a museum of French military history.

<sup>20</sup> Mariette Job’s speech ends with, “Passant, souviens-toi” which literally translates to “Passerby, remember.” However, the English slogan “never again” has been used by museums and organizations archiving the Holocaust, and it has taken on a similar meaning, urging recognition of the Holocaust (<https://www.adl.org/resources/blog/recommitting-never-again-learning-never-forget>. Accessed 29 Feb. 2024).