

Françoise Frenkel realized a dream when she opened Berlin's first French-language bookshop in 1921. The shop was frequented by Berlin literati and the many French writers who passed through the city, but in 1939 Frenkel closed the shop and fled to Paris where, as a Jew, she believed she would be safer. Her memoir *Rien où poser sa tête* (1943; *No Place To Lay One's Head*) was written in published in Geneva in 1945 and then forgotten, until it was picked up at a flea market in Nice a few years ago and republished in French. It now appears in a fine English translation by Stephanie Smee. It is a vivid account of life in hiding and on the run after Frenkel left occupied Paris for Avignon, Nice, Grenoble, Annecy and, eventually, Switzerland, where the book ends. In a haunting preface, Patrick Modiano, that pre-eminent conjuror of literary ghosts, skirts around the few details that are known of Frenkel's life besides the four years of pursuit and refuge that she tells in this beautifully written book:

Her book will always remain for me that letter from an unknown woman, a letter forgotten *postea restante* for an eternity, that you've received in error, it seems, but that perhaps was intended for you. That curious impression I had . . . was also the effect of hearing the voice of somebody whose face one can't quite make out in the half-light . . .

The book is not only a moving memoir but also an intriguing historical document, thanks not least to Frenkel's emphasis on the often unsolicited help she received from ordinary French people. She pointed out even as the war was still raging how "one could write volumes about the courage, the generosity, the fearlessness of those families who offered assistance to fugitives in every *département* and even in Occu-

Letters for eternity

Tales of survival from the Holocaust

NATASHA LEHRER

Françoise Frenkel

NO PLACE TO LAY ONE'S HEAD

Translated by Stephanie Smee
304pp. Pushkin Press. £16.99.
978 1 78227 399 8

Edith Eger

THE CHOICE
400pp. Rider. £14.99.
978 1 84604 510 3

pied France, putting their lives at risk". Her account runs counter to the dominant narrative, favoured over the past forty years or so, of French complicity and more or less enthusiastic collaboration with the Germans. Throughout the text are descriptions of the dozens of people who, whether through minute gestures of kindness or acts of great bravery and personal risk, saved Frenkel, time and again, from round-ups, arrest and starvation. From an anonymous "aristocratic lady" in Avignon who invites Frenkel in for a drink, offering her cider from a silver and gold goblet to quench her thirst, to the friends who obtain a *laissez-passer* for her to cross into the Free Zone, to the "Neapolitan peasant" who saves her from arrest by French border guards, to the French farmer who helps her cross the border into Switzerland—the roster is testimony to what the historian Jacques Semelin has termed the multiple "acts of micro-resistance" that help to explain the high proportion of Jews who survived the war in France in spite of occupation and collaboration.

The most moving relationship Frenkel describes is with Monsieur and Madame Marius, a couple who ran a hairdressing salon and who provided her with shelter, food and much else besides, first hiding her in their apartment, then, when she was forced to flee, helping her find shelter elsewhere, using their connections to get her a visa for Switzerland, and regularly popping up with food and friendship throughout her peregrinations. Towards the end

of the book they reappear: "At the sight of these two, and their evident loyalty, I dissolved into tears . . . They too seemed moved, for however great the joy of being saved, even greater must be the joy of those noble souls who come to the aid of a human being in distress".

Edith Eger's *The Choice* tells a no less powerful story. Born in Hungary, Eger was a keen ballet dancer and promising gymnast. In 1943, aged sixteen, she was thrown out of the Olympic training team because she was Jewish; aged seventeen, she was deported to Auschwitz with one of her sisters and her mother. She describes waiting in line after their arrival at the death camp, where Josef Mengele approached them. "Is she your mother or your sister?" he asks. "Mother," I say. As soon as the word is out of my mouth, I want to pull it back into my throat. I have realized too late the significance of the question." Her mother is sent to the left, to be gassed, Magda and Edith to the right, to live, at least for now. Not until the end of the book will Edith articulate the sense of guilt she has borne throughout her life for her mother's death.

Singled out one day by Mengele, Edith dances herself into a Sufi-like state. "He must be impressed by my performance, because he tosses me a loaf of bread—a gesture, as it turns out, that will later save my life." She shares the bread with her sister and bunkmates, one of whom, many months later during the death march, remembers the gesture and helps her after she falls, too ill to continue. At Auschwitz she is nearly raped by Mengele; she recounts the episode with a delicacy that renders the scene's horror even more acute: "I'm naked with [my mother's] murderer . . . Just as I'm close enough for him to touch me, with fingers that I determine not to feel, a phone rings in another room. He flinches. He rebuttons his coat".

She survived Auschwitz and three death marches before eventually being liberated by American soldiers. The horrors did not stop there; so frail that she could barely stand, she was sexually assaulted by a drunk GI. Somehow she had broken her back, but she continued

to walk, in agony, for several months, before eventually being put in a full cast. Eger conveys the astonishing human capacity for enduring almost unbelievable suffering, both mental and physical, with quiet resolve.

The second part of the book is an account of a life's work overcoming trauma and helping others to do the same. In 1946 Eger married another Hungarian survivor, Béla. They lived well, but Edith felt "like an elegant parrot, nothing but an echo dolled up in nice clothes". Never has the phrase "haunted by memories" had so much meaning: "Sitting in parlours and around ornate dining tables, I gaze at our friends and acquaintances and wonder . . . Have they lost the same things that Béla and I have lost?" In post-war communist Hungary their baby daughter Marianne fell ill and nearly died—there was no penicillin in the country. Later they decide to leave, initially planning to move to the newly founded state of Israel, but eventually getting a visa to the United States where, like migrants the world over and throughout history, they began the challenging project of reconstructing their lives in a new country and language. This forthright, damaged woman spoke no English, and found herself trapped in her new life, a frustrated housewife and mother, consumed with bitterness and grief at all that had been taken from her, and harbouring deeply repressed memories of her wartime trauma. Wanting nothing more than to give her three children a "normal" life, she told them nothing of her past.

As part of a slow process of rehabilitation, in her thirties she embarked on a degree, eventually completing a doctorate in psychology at the age of fifty-one. She became a disciple, and then a friend, of the great psychiatrist and fellow Auschwitz survivor Viktor Frankl, who "gave me permission not to hide anymore, who helped me find words for my experience, who helped me cope with my pain". She has spent the past half-century drawing on her own experiences and understanding of extreme trauma to help others overcome theirs. Her memories are vivid and visceral, and the grace with which she writes both about her own life and about helping others "escape the prisons of their own minds" is incredibly moving. Esmé Schwall Weigand, Eger's co-author, has helped Eger write a masterpiece of Holocaust literature. Her memoir, like her life, is extraordinary, harrowing and inspiring in equal measure.

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