

A silence broken

This rediscovered memoir by a Jewish bookseller is a vital eyewitness account of Vichy France, says Catherine Taylor

Two of the most powerful works of literature to emerge from the second world war had a famously circuitous route to publication: Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl*, its loose pages handed to her father Otto, the only member of her immediate family to survive deportation to Poland in 1944; and Irène Némirovsky's unfinished novel sequence *Suite Française*, which was discovered by her daughter in a suitcase decades after Némirovsky perished at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

A vital addition to these eyewitness accounts is *No Place to Lay One's Head*, the

wartime memoir of Françoise Frenkel, a Jewish woman originally from Poland who ran La Maison du Livre, a French bookshop in Berlin, from 1921 to 1939. The book, under its original title *Rien où poser sa tête*, was published in Geneva in 1945, before vanishing for decades from public view. Forced to flee Germany on the outbreak of war and seek refuge in a Paris that would soon come under German occupation, Frenkel describes a desperate odyssey through France until she succeeded in crossing the border to neutral Switzerland and safety. As with Frank and Némirovsky, Frenkel's book was a fortuitous find: chanced upon in a bric-a-brac sale in Nice in 2010.

What differentiates Frenkel from Frank and Némirovsky is that so little is known of her. Frank became a household name and an everlasting symbol of the Holocaust; Némirovsky, before the Vichy government's collusion with its occupiers obscured and eventually

annihilated her, was a celebrated writer in her adopted France, discovered by a new generation when *Suite Française* appeared to general fanfare in 2004.

The other main difference is, of course, that Frenkel survived. Yet there is scant information about her after 1945, apart from the fact that she died in Nice 30 years later.

Frenkel gives us an urgent narrative of the crucial years of her life. After a brief, gorgeous opening explaining how she became fascinated with books as a child growing up near Lodz, we follow her through her studies at the Sorbonne and apprenticeship to an antiquarian bookseller. Then comes the opening of the bookshop in Berlin in the heady years of the Weimar Republic, which became a cultural centre and attracted visiting authors from Colette to André Maurois. The brutal counterpoint to this is the rise of National Socialism, "the restless larvae of the Hitler Youth",

complaining to his friends, it seems.



**No Place To Lay
One's Head**

by Françoise Frenkel
translated by
Stephanie Smee
Pushkin Press £16.99
304 pages

Kristallnacht and the gradual dehumanisation of Jews in Europe, and finally the flight to France.

No Place to Lay One's Head has an appealing style, captured in an assured translation by Stephanie Smee. There is a wild beauty to the prose, with ravishing descriptions of medieval towns, from Annecy to Avignon, held in check by a businesswoman's instinct for facts – the wry noting that by 1942 France was being sustained by the black

market, blamed by German propaganda on a Jewish population that by then had mostly disappeared into the camps.

Frenkel herself is constantly shuffled from safe house to safe house, including one run by a *châtelaine* who evicts her after a week but keeps her payment of provisions as "compensation". She finds a temporary home in the chaotic "Noah's Ark" of refugees from across Europe who inhabit Nice's La Roseraie Hotel in uneasy truce and shared apprehension. Terror arrives from July 1942, when the round-up of "stateless" Jews such as Frenkel accelerated, the aim being to intern and exterminate.

Mothers forcibly separated from their children slit their wrists. Frenkel, who missed a round-up by mere seconds, writes: "For a moment, I was tempted to run towards the crowd, shouting, 'Take me, I'm one of them!' . . . But cold logic took over." She prevails due to a mixture of bravery, luck, assistance from many

who risked their lives to save hers, and a grim unsentimentality that wavers into pathos at certain points – such as when she agonises over her mother in Poland, the loss of her "vagabond" suitcases, confiscated by the Gestapo, and above all her "grieving and deathly tired heart".

Yet as Nobel laureate Patrick Modiano points out in his fine preface, Frenkel's major evasion is any mention of her husband, Simon Raichenstein, who ran La Maison du Livre with her until his exile to France in 1933. Raichenstein died at Auschwitz in August 1942. With this knowledge, the general melancholy that saturates *No Place to Lay One's Head* becomes sharply specific, and renders Frenkel's inscription in the first edition of her memoir, appended in the dossier at the end of the book, unbearably sad: "I seek inner peace: I am grieving for so many and know not where my family have been laid to rest. How great is my suffering."