

Puzzles of reminiscence

The burden of his father's murky legacy has apparently left Nobel Prize-winning novelist Patrick Modiano uneasy about his own partial Jewishness
by Yaëlle Azagury

THE AWARD last October of the Nobel Prize for Literature to French writer Patrick Modiano seems, in the wake of the Paris terror attack against Jews in January this year, an ominous foreshadowing. Modiano's fiction is mostly set in 1940s occupied France, a period when Nazi anti-Semitism was promoted by French collaborationists as well as the Germans.

He never directly experienced the occupation, a time of muddled moral choices for France, yet it has been the focus of his work.

Ever proud to be the land of enlightenment, France had long evaded examining its role in collaboration with the Nazis, arguing that Charles de Gaulle and Philippe Pétain were two sides of one coin. The former was the "sword," the latter – when the government retreated to Vichy – "the shield" against the Nazis.

Modiano, albeit in a subdued fashion and in

the form of dreamy musings rather than active political engagement, embarks on a valiant endeavor to challenge this myth. This undertaking began in the year of the student riots, 1968, when he published his first book.

Modiano's work is neither militant nor moralizing. Rather it uses the occupation as a backdrop, following the trajectories of villains and victims alike, zooming in on a somber demi-monde made of fake foreign aristocrats, adventurers, actresses and circus people, black market racketeers and petty criminals, who sailed through the crepuscular world of occupied France under the radar and often with dreadful panache.

But he also brings into focus anonymous figures rescued from oblivion, myriad Jews whose unfathomable tragedies remained unrecorded, whose muffled suffering never found a voice. One of these drifting characters is Dora Bruder (Modiano's eponymous



narrative was translated into English as "The Search Warrant"), a young runaway Jewish girl – an Anne Frank of sorts – tracked down until her name was found on a list of Jews deported to Auschwitz. His books are often memorials for the missing, the forgotten and the inconspicuous, and all those who were swallowed up by history.

Famously shy and known for shunning the limelight, Modiano has a moderately-sized yet loyal following in France, but remains rel-



CHARLES PLATIAU / REUTERS

actively unknown to English-language readers.

Few of his works can be found in English, but “Suspended Sentences,” a newly translated trilogy bearing the title of one of its novels, is a good place to get acquainted with him. It is elegantly rendered by Mark Polizzotti, whose rather literal translation is felicitous. For instance, he selects words with Latin rather than Anglo-Saxon roots, a technique which imparts a whiff of quaintness to the overall atmosphere, and fits Modiano’s cool prose and

the sense of remove suffusing his novels.

Encapsulating Modiano’s plots in a few words is an arduous task. They are loosely melded together. Characters are summoned through haphazard pieces of their lives, often taking the narrator/detective to other figures no less ungraspable. The plot thus becomes like nesting dolls, each one concealing the next. The final image is then fragmented, incomplete and remote, leading us to regard identity as contradictory and elusive.

Describing him as ‘a Marcel Proust of our time,’ the Swedish Academy awarded Patrick Modiano the 2014 Nobel Prize for Literature, October 9

Memory is at the epicenter of his preoccupations, and his novels are often painstaking puzzles of reminiscence, with a particular fondness for lists and inventories, addresses and names from the phone book. These are like hieroglyphics summoned to testify to



ANDERS WIKLUND / REUTERS

Modiano delivers his Nobel lecture at the Swedish Academy in Stockholm, December 7

a civilization long extinct, or branches on a mountain edge one clings to before the abyss. They give the illusion of rationality in an otherwise impenetrable world, but often have the opposite effect, de-realizing reality further in Modiano’s dreamlike fiction.

In “Afterimage”, the first novella in the trilogy, photography is the medium of choice to summon people long lost. The narrator attaches himself to Francis Jansen, a photographer “with a quality he possessed in art as in life, which is so precious but so hard to acquire: keeping silent... Of all the punctuation marks he told me, ellipses were his favorite.” Could he be talking about the author himself? Yes, for Modiano’s austere writings are best fleshed out in their margins.

So the narrator sets out to classify his photos, like a sleuth gathering clues, struggling to elucidate the riddle of his identity. Of Jansen, we are told a few things. Born in Antwerp in 1920, he was of Italian nationality. He assisted the war photographer Robert Capa – a real historical figure – and “was picked up during a raid and interned as a Jew in the Drancy camp,” the infamous concentration camp set up by the French, often as a grim prelude to Auschwitz.

Freed by the Italian government later in the war, he is an elusive figure who leaves for Mexico in the spring of 1964 shortly after the narrator meets him, forever dropping out of sight. The exploration into his life takes us in turn to Colette Laurent, a woman whose photograph is found by the narrator, and a new search into her life is then set in motion. The story unfolds as a series of chance encounters, all strung together by a faint thread. We are left with the illusion that chance itself is the sign of a higher order, but that hope soon vanishes, the ending more tantalizing than the onset.

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“Flower of Ruins” is the third novella in the collection and follows a similar structure: the narrator is perplexed by the mysterious death of a couple whose suicide in 1933 after an orgy remains unexplained. He decides

to retrace their steps on the fateful night with help from the police report and newspaper clippings, but this initial investigation soon collides with a second one about Pacheco, a shady figure with seeming connections to the “Rue Lauriston gang” – a band, part thieves, part French Gestapo – and ostensibly, an avatar of Modiano’s father.

“Suspended Sentences,” the second novella in the trilogy, is the most personal. The French title is “Remise de Peine,” a play on words meaning both a remission of sentence in the legal sense (peine as punishment), and a bequeathing of grief (peine as sorrow). The narrator Patoche, a nickname for Patrick, recounts his life with friends of his parents, who were often away and neglected him and his brother. Both were cared for by a crowd of colorful friends of their parents, all haloed in mystery.

Brimming with autobiographical elements, it is a wistful coming of age story, with faces making fleeting appearances, a castle with frightening magnetism, an unsavory gallery of characters from the world of the circus, also part of an undefined underworld. Most get arrested at story’s end, leaving the children alone, as in a fairy tale gone awry.

It is a glib trick to explain an author’s universe solely through his biography, but an even more foolish pretense to ignore his biography entirely. The latter rings even more true in the case of Modiano whose writings are intimately cross-pollinated by his own biography, strewn with his personal obsessions, rippling from book to book. They are exquisitely woven into his texts, amplified through repetition but also deftly transformed through literary art, so that his novels are never purely biographical.

I started reading him in French more than 20 years ago, as a student of literature, and his style, made up of brief sentences, both concise and full of promise, and so atypical in the French literary tradition, was mysteriously affecting.

Certain people and themes come back again and again. There is his brother Rudy whom he loved deeply, dead at age 10 of leukemia; there is the world of the circus which fascinated him, perhaps because of his mother, an unloving actress always on tour; or the motif of runaway children like Dora Bruder, dating back to his own fugues, and his unhappy childhood; there is Drancy and Auschwitz, ill-fated symbols and epitome

me of irretrievable absence; and there is his father the Jew, Albert Modiano, involved in collaborationist activities with the Gestapo. No doubt the burden of his murky legacy left Modiano the son uneasy about his own part Jewishness.

His first novel, “La Place de l’Etoile” (1968), still not translated into English, is a complex and outlandish fantasy staging the delirious monologue of a Jew named Raphael Shlemilovitch – whose name is ostensibly a wink to the Yiddish *schlemiel*, or anti-hero – both victim of anti-Semitism and notorious anti-Semite himself. The book could be a cathartic therapy session of sorts for his own father, while also a ferocious and satirical tour-de-force on the anti-Semitic cliché of the powerful Jew.

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It won two prestigious prizes in France, but may be off-putting to some, perhaps because anti-Semitic rhetoric of any sort – whether in jest or not – must be handled with care. Modiano has since shifted to a more restrained style.

But what, exactly, is Jewish about Modiano’s writing? Although he is secretive about his personal life, he has given a few clues. His paternal grandfather was originally from Salonika, and belonged to a Jewish family from Tuscany established in the Ottoman Empire. The artist Amedeo Modigliani was a distant cousin. His grandfather left Salonika for Alexandria, moving to Venezuela after a few years where he took up trading in pearls. He finally settled in Paris where he became an antiques dealer. His son Albert (Modiano’s father) was born in 1912. Modiano himself is married to the artist and jewelry designer Dominique Zehrfuss, whose mother was a Tunisian Jew.

Evidently, he is not a Jewish writer in the

mold of Philip Roth with his neurotic ruminations, or, on the Sephardi side, the late Albert Cohen (another Salonikan Jew who wrote in French) with his lyrical gusto, to name just two. In my opinion, he is interested in Jewishness inasmuch as it pertains to the idea of a trace, an echo, the faintest of clues, a notion at the core of his writing. Or perhaps, it is the other way around: vestiges are so crucial in his work precisely because of his own dim connection with his past, remoteness often deemed the highest form of being.

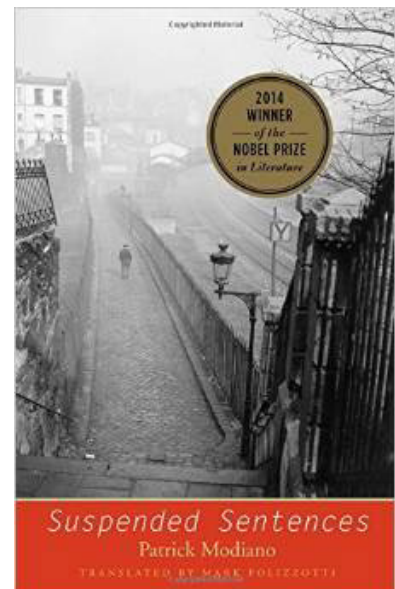
Either way, here is what he writes in his 2005 autobiography, “Un Pedigree” (to be published in English translation later this summer by Yale University Press): “I am a like a dog pretending to have a pedigree. My mother and father are not bound to any specific milieu. They were so tossed around, so unsettled that I must strive to find some footprints and some markers in the quicksand as one strives to fill out with some half-erased letters a legal form at the registry office or an administrative questionnaire.”

Street dogs often make shadowy appearances in his prose. The metaphor of the mutt, the dog without pedigree is particularly crucial. And I wonder if hybridity, which was often a cliché ascribed to Jews, especially in the Diaspora – is not here synonymous with Jewishness.

Because of his love for Paris, with its topography meticulously and tirelessly explored in his novels, he has often been identified with the French 19th century figure of the flâneur, the wanderer. But isn’t the Wandering Jew the nomad and the flâneur par excellence? And doesn’t Modiano’s indefatigable rambling through Paris replicate his grandfather’s journeys, so typical of the Jewish experience until the creation of the State of Israel?

In his speech of acceptance of the Nobel Prize in Stockholm last December, Modiano spoke exquisitely about his love for music, the names and words he enjoys selecting for their musicality, and the themes, often haunting, that recur in his work. So, I believe, is Jewishness for him: like a melodic phrase declined in a lower key, an undefined longing, the echo of an echo, never fully incorporated, but perhaps more alive in spite of it. ■

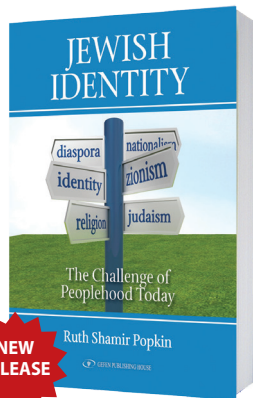
Yaëlle Azagury is a freelance cultural reporter who writes about French and Sephardi culture



Suspended Sentences
Patrick Modiano
Translated by Mark Polizzotti
Yale University Press
232 pages; \$16

Jewish Identity

By Ruth Shamir Popkin



NEW RELEASE

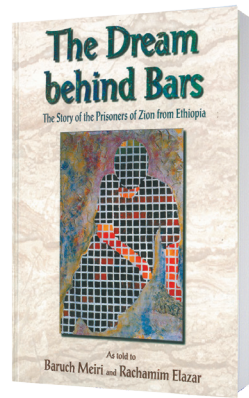
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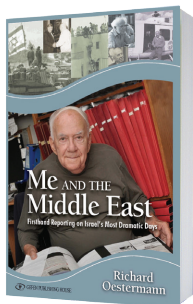


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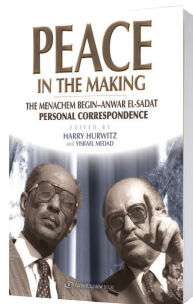


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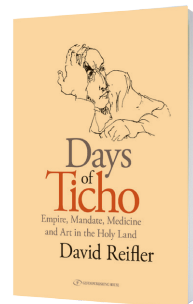


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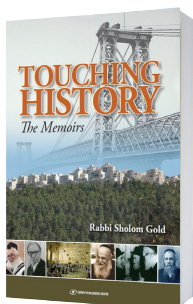


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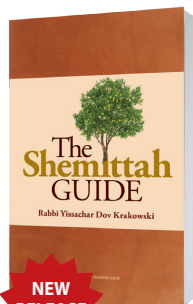


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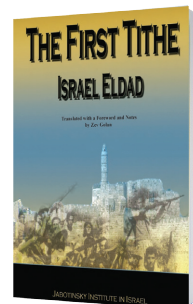
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