

We are proud and honored to present on our covers a painting by the internationally acclaimed French artist Francine Mayran. Our art editor, Pnina Rosenberg, offers an analysis and historical contextualization of this haunting work.

Pnina Rosenberg

## About the Cover Painting “L’Exode”: The Invisible Bystanders

all with a common destiny  
losing what is dear  
leaving behind one’s life  
exodus of men,  
women, children  
in a grey and cold place  
without help, without future ...  
our eyes are witness  
to the unacceptable  
to the unbearable  
men, women  
even children  
denounced, deported  
carried away to stations  
plotted horror  
calculated extermination  
and no one says a word

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**FRANCINE MAYRAN** (2008), from the exhibition *Passive Witnesses, Guilty Witnesses?* (p. 48)

In June 2008 the artist and psychiatrist Francine Mayran mounted the exhibition *Passive Witnesses, Guilty Witnesses?* at the Regional Council of Alsace, France. In texts that accompany the paintings, the artist comments:

Today, we are hooked to our screens, flooded with information and images coming from all corners of the world: the beating of monks in Burma, the crushed in Tibet, the crimes of Kosovo, the beheaded Tutsis, all the genocides of the world. ... The Iraqis killed in a daily bloodbath of bombings, the deaths in the Twin Towers. ... Some of us remain unaffected, as though it is all fiction. Others are shocked. Either way, life continues, unchanged.

The 28 oil paintings were divided into four sections: “The Atmosphere of the Tragedy”; “The Call to Us, the Witnesses”; “Questioning Humanity”; and “To Pass On.” All raise questions about witnesses and their obligations, unmet during the Holocaust, to speak out against injustice and genocide. Mayran asks, “How can we passively accept these images while we ourselves are direct witnesses?” (p. 45) and continues:

We can’t turn our backs in indifference and resume our lives as before, as though nothing has happened, as though the only way to survive these abhorrent crimes is to erase these lives, erase these deaths. The denial of these crimes, their trivialization is itself part of the violence. It is this indifference, this silence that permitted the Holocaust. How to shake humanity from its trance, from becoming accustomed to and accepting of this violence? (p. 45)

Our cover painting was chosen from the exhibit segment “The Call to Us, the Witnesses.” Titled “L’Exode” (“The Exodus”), it is a large, striking diptych (80 x 200 cm.) portraying in expressive brush strokes a panoramic scene of deportation: a long line of people pacing toward an unseen, unknown destination. The composition is skillfully divided into two parts that together create the whole. The procession of deportees, starting in the left panel of the diptych (here, our front cover), shows a small group of normal, almost-recognizable persons. This group of men and women are depicted in detail; they are properly, even elegantly, dressed with suits, coats, and hats; two hold small suitcases. Yet something is disturbing and grim: Although each figure is clearly defined, the faces are blank and unrecognizable; the men seem to be carrying or wearing *tallesim* (Jewish prayer shawls). In the right panel of the diptych (here, our back cover and inside front and back covers), which continues and completes the left one, the deportees become an anonymous mass, an endless line beyond the borders of the painting. Even this large

format cannot depict its entirety; only the limits of the canvas dictate an artificial end to this tragic convoy.

Mayran's work reflects a literal as well as metaphoric truth. "I paint only from archival photographs," she explains, "because I want my art to reflect the truth, to be an authentic representation of what happened. I was not there; I cannot imagine it. I must look at photographs for the truth" (2009 b, private conversation).

The artistic representation of the deportees' transformation in "*L'Exode*" parallels the Nazi objectives: turning the individual, ordinary, decent Jew into a part of an anonymous mass of non-persons whose only identity will become a serial number, whose destination will be final. This process is hinted at by the portrayal of the faceless persons and gradually progresses and increases all along the wretched human line.

These pathetic souls gradually became invisible: They are depicted in a void—without landscape, urban scenery, people who witnessed the dehumanization of their neighbors, colleagues, friends. It is as if the procession of uprooted people took place in no-man's land and not in populated cities and villages. Those ordinary citizens, who were part of the society and resembled their neighbors, are now ignored and abandoned by them: Nobody is there to protest, to stand up against what is happening; virtually all turn a blind eye.

The front line is composed of a woman and three men, rendered as if they are going for a walk, posed for a brief moment for the invisible but palpably present audience of onlookers. The bystanders are not literally revealed by the artist; instead, they are evoked by the deportees' gaze. They are (re)created by their absence, their roaring silence, and their deliberate ignorance. Keeping them unseen, the artist condemns them for their appalling indifference. "My work is a revolt," she writes,

criying out to the humanity in us all. It is an appeal for hope: in humankind, in a world that learns from its past so that never, ever again we are witness to such a crime. In the 21st century, if calls are not raised and people do not become indignant and outraged, genocide will be nothing more than banal. The brutality that is a latent part of us could once again devour the world. (Mayran, 2009 a, p. 63)

Another intriguing absence in this group are the children. Does this mean they were exempt from deportation? No, on the contrary: It is estimated that one and a half million children were murdered in the Holocaust. The French context of the Shoah exposes yet another chapter in this Machiavellian, cynical, and diabolical story. Once the German occupiers decided to deport the Jews from France to the East, they did not include children. It was not for any

humanitarian reason, of course; it was, rather, that including children would have revealed to the French community that the deported Jews were not being sent to labor camps, as the Germans had proclaimed. However, the French President during those years, Pierre Laval, insisted on including children under the age of 16 years in the one-way convoys. His aim was to ensure that "not a single one [Jewish child] is to remain in France" (Marrus & Paxton, 1981, p. 266) and to also pacify public opinion, as people were upset at the dreadful scenes of parents being separated from their offspring.<sup>1</sup>

Mayran's omission of children from this scene is precisely what evokes their presence. Where are the children? What was their fate? The artist presents the annihilation of the then-present generation together with the extinction of the future generation. Hence, the painting creates an ironic and tragic reversal of the biblical exodus. In the Bible, the current generation, ("*Dor Ha'midbar*," the Generation in the Wilderness) of the people of Israel were banned from reaching their destiny, the Promised Land, and doomed to die in the desert due to their misconduct. Only the new generation—those who did not sin—were to inherit their land. The Holocaust "exodus," however, implies clearly that both present and future generations are doomed to die—generations whose only sin was being Jewish.

With equally tragic irony, "*L'Exode*" is also the term given to the flight southward of eight to 10 million French citizens and soldiers during the spring and summer of 1940, following the defeat of France and the advance of the German invasion from the north.<sup>2</sup> Uprooted, disoriented men and women, children and the aged, crowded the railways and roads, which were frequently under bombing attacks. They went by car until they ran out of gasoline, then by bicycle, and eventually by foot, dragging goods and mattresses piled on carts and wheelbarrows. It was the biggest single movement of population in Europe since the Dark Ages. After the armistice and the subsequent division of France into the Occupied and the Non-Occupied zones by the Demarcation Line, many of the French refugees regained their homes. Yet two thirds of the Jews, about 70,000, who took part in this exodus could not return due to decrees banning them from crossing the Demarcation Line. Many of those displaced Jews were later interned in French camps from where they were deported to Auschwitz and other Eastern European death camps.

Mayran's educational objective, "to pass on the memory, to bear witness to the witnesses, to become a link in the chain of generations" (2008, p. 9) expressed in her exhibitions and in this painting, correlates to the biblical dictate "You shall tell your children" (Exodus, 13:8), referring to the remembrance of the exodus from Egypt. To relate the story from one generation to the next so that its protagonists will be kept alive through our memory is a core aspect of Jewish

tradition and heritage. The 1940 exodus was, for many Jews who had sought refuge in France, only a “dress rehearsal” for their final exodus—deportation and murder. This annihilation was facilitated by a world that preferred to remain ignorant, an accusation so expressively manifested in Mayran’s “*L’Exode*.” The painting makes witnesses of us all. ■

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**FRANCINE MAYRAN** is a psychiatrist, painter, and sculptor. A member of Alsace [France] Independent Artists Association (AIAA), she expresses herself through both color and material with canvases and ceramic sculpture. Her exhibits include *Empreintes du passé, transmissions de mémoire (Prints of the Past, Transmissions of Memory)* at the Alsace-Moselle Memorial in Schirmeck (2010) and *La Shoah et son ombre (The Shoah and its Shadow)* at Karlsruhe (Germany) and at the Global Peace Center in Verdun (2010). Other exhibits are scheduled at the Center of Tolerance Gaon de Vilna in Vilnius and at the Fort of Breendonk in Belgium (2011). The book *La Shoah et son ombre (The Shoah and its Shadow)*, including 70 oil paintings and French poem/texts (translated into both English and German), is available in print by the artist ([francine.mayran@gmail.com](mailto:francine.mayran@gmail.com)). To contact the artist, visit her Web site at [www.fmayran.com](http://www.fmayran.com) or e-mail [francine.mayran@gmail.com](mailto:francine.mayran@gmail.com).

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#### NOTES

- 1 For more information, see Marrus and Paxton (1981, pp. 263-269).
- 2 The 1940 Exodus is documented in most publications that deal with France during World War II. It has also been richly portrayed in literature and films. Among the recent publications is Hanna Diamond’s (2007) *Fleeing Hitler: France 1940*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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