

The French Revolution and the Haskalah: the Diary of Lucien Dreyfus as an Attempt to Understand the European Catastrophe

Presenter: Jean-Marc Dreyfus

Shortly after the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C. first opened its doors to the public, eight notebooks arrived. The notebooks were divided among six separate brown envelopes -- sent by regular, first-class mail. A Dallas, Texas postmark was stamped on each envelope's upper right-hand corner. Aside from that postmark, they contained no other clue as to the sender's identity. No return address. No accompanying letter. This was the wartime diary of Lucien Dreyfus, an Alsatian high school teacher from Strasbourg who was in exile in Nice. The diary is not well structured. It is written in French with some words of German and regional Yiddish. It describes the experience of a man who was a communal intellectual (journalist for the local Jewish press in the 1930s) and who painstakingly tried to make sense of the events he was witnessing and he suffered from (he was fired from his position in the Lycée Massena in December 1940). Dreyfus was born in the Reichsland in Alsace and had a German education, studying literature in Berlin. He became French in 1919 and embraced the myths of French emancipation and the Republic. His diary is riddled with considerations on Jewish history, both in France and in Germany. Dreyfus was an avid reader of the 'Wissenschaft des Judentums' and of French literary works of the 19th Century. He came to the conclusion that Europe suffered from a collapse of spirituality and himself came back to a more intense religious practice and the reading of the Torah. He was deported to Auschwitz in October 1943.

The presentation will question how exceptional such writing is in the French diaries of the Holocaust. The diary was edited and published in 2018 by Jean-Marc Dreyfus and Alexandra Garbarini (Paris: Le Manuscrit). A translation in English is forthcoming with the USHMM.