



A LIVING  
MEMORIAL  
TO THE  
HOLOCAUST



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**EXTRAORDINARY AND ENIGMATIC AUTHOR IRÈNE NÉMIROVSKY  
FOCUS OF FASCINATING EXHIBITION**

***Woman of Letters: Irène Némirovsky and Suite Française***  
*at the Museum of Jewish Heritage—A Living Memorial to the Holocaust*

NEW YORK, NY— The story of Irène Némirovsky is that of a remarkable writer who was driven to create, even as her world was being destroyed around her. Her life, work, and legacy are the subject of a new, extraordinary exhibition, ***Woman of Letters: Irène Némirovsky and Suite Française*** opening at the **Museum of Jewish Heritage—A Living Memorial to the Holocaust on September 24, 2008.**

*Woman of Letters* is more than literary history: it is the story of a mother and her daughters, of memory and identity, of legacy and loss. A Russian-born Jewish writer, Némirovsky quickly became an acclaimed author in her adopted France, where she lived for many years. But her fame and accomplishment, and even her conversion to Catholicism, were not enough to save her; she was arrested in 1942 and deported to Auschwitz, where she perished within a short time. Three months later her husband, Michel Epstein, was also arrested and deported to Auschwitz, where he was murdered upon arrival.

Among the few items Irène left her daughters, Denise and Elisabeth, who survived the war, was a valise that contained a leather notebook they believed to be their mother's diary. Haunted by painful memories, they avoided opening the notebook until Denise resolved to read it more than fifty years after her mother's death. She discovered not a diary, but a major literary work: the first two parts of an unfinished five-part novel, *Suite Française*, now a bestseller in several countries.

This remarkable story— about a long-forgotten writer and her literary tour de force — will be told through stunning and heartbreaking artifacts, including the manuscript, and the valise itself, never before exhibited. In fact, aside from the manuscript, none of the source material for the exhibition has ever been displayed before or even been out of France.

The exhibition is a co-production with Institut Mémoires de l'Édition Contemporaine (IMEC), which has on deposit the author's papers and those of her publisher. Please visit [www.imec-archives.com](http://www.imec-archives.com) for more information.

Two years ago, Museum Director David G. Marwell was invited to a book launch of *Suite Française* at the French Cultural Center in New York, where he first encountered the manuscript, on display for the first time and only for that event. "It was the most extraordinary artifact I had ever seen. The manuscript said so much about the person who wrote it and the circumstances under which she wrote. As an artifact, it communicated to me in a profound way. I knew we had to tell its story. I knew, too, that it would be a challenge to relate this story with all of its nuance and texture. Irène Némirovsky's life and work must be understood in the full context of the world in which she lived and in the art form in which she expressed herself."

"Irène was a stunning and incisive novelist, writing in real time, unmediated, as the German invasion of France unfolded," remarked Deputy Director and exhibition curator Ivy Barsky. "It is a privilege to bring her life and legacy to light through the extraordinary objects and artifacts that survived her. Irène's narrative is a Holocaust story, a French story, and a Jewish story — in all its complexity. We are especially honored to have the trust of Denise Epstein who, for the first time ever, is allowing the treasured valise out of her possession and out of France," Ms. Barsky concluded.

(More)

## About the Exhibition

Although the circumstances under which the book was created, how it was passed on, and how it came to light will form its centerpiece, this exhibition will explore Irène's various identities: daughter, wife, mother; émigré; writer; Catholic convert; and Jew. Highlights of the exhibition include family photographs and filmed interviews; Irène's ID card that documents her struggle to see her daughters once they had been moved from Paris for their own safety; and her ration card visually confirms when she was arrested. Museum visitors will be able to view the *Suite Française* manuscript in its entirety using an interactive computer program in the exhibition. Visitors can flip through the manuscript, and witness for themselves the tiny writing — evidence that the author knew that paper was limited and that she was not sure when she would obtain more, and that time itself was a scarce resource. The notes Irène wrote to herself and her crossed-out notations illustrate her writing process. Visitors will feel the urgency Irène felt as she penned what would be her last work. "As you can imagine, life here is very sad, and if it weren't for my work..." she wrote to her publisher. "Even the work becomes painful when the future is so uncertain," she concluded.

Perhaps the most poignant artifact that will be on display is a note with Irène's last written words to her daughters, hastily written at an internment camp. "Courage and hope," she wrote. "You are in my heart, my loved ones. May God help us all." Miraculously, the note reached the girls. It was their hope that their mother's story would be remembered. Their wishes were realized in 2004 — more than six decades after her death — when Némirovsky received the Renaudot Prize, France's most prestigious literary award, which was the first time the prize had been given posthumously.

## About Irène Némirovsky and Her Family

In July 1942, Némirovsky was arrested and taken to a camp in Pithiviers. From there, she was deported to Auschwitz in Convoy 6 along with 1,000 other Jews. Irène's husband, Michel Epstein, a banker, was taken to Auschwitz three months later, and killed upon arrival, by which time, Irène was long dead. Their two daughters, Denise (age 13) and Elisabeth (age 5), survived, thanks to the courageous actions of the girls' nanny and others, and despite vigorous efforts to hunt them down.

Beyond memories, the daughters had little to remind them of their parents. Irène and Michel's conversion to Catholicism in 1939 did not protect them from anti-Jewish measures. The family had been forced to abandon their Paris apartment and its contents and moved to the small village of Issy-l'Évêque in May 1940. Irène, even with her fame, achievement, and powerful friends, and despite her own personal identification, was defined by her enemies and treated simply as a "stateless" Jew.

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## About the Companion Volume

In conjunction with the exhibition, IMEC and Five Ties Publishers will publish a companion volume, further making the work and life story of this accomplished writer available to all. The book will include "The Virgins," a short story never before translated and published in English. In fact, "The Virgins" appeared in print on the day Irène was deported. Published under a pseudonym, it would be her last work published during her lifetime. Also included in the volume will be Irène's notes for *Captivity*, which would have become the third part of *Suite Française*; an enlightening interview with Irène's daughter Denise Epstein; and a biographical chronology, richly illustrated with never-before-published photographs of Irène and her family.

"Following the international success of *Suite Française*, it is indeed a privilege to publish a book on the life and work of Irène Némirovsky in conjunction with the exhibition *Woman of Letters*," publisher Garrett White said. "The book will be of great interest to anyone who has followed Némirovsky's story, and to those who are just becoming familiar with her writing and her personal history."

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