Site of Infamy: The Vel' d'Hiv in French Cinema

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The 15th *arrondissement* of Paris is sometimes called the 'parks quarter' because of the tiny islands of greenery laid out in the 19th century.[1] In the early 20th century, this Left Bank quarter was a mixture of populous working-class lodgings to the north and a remote wasteland of factories and slaughterhouses to the south. Today, despite the radically anti-aesthetic rebuilding of the 1960s and 1970s, with the Montparnasse Tower and river-front development, guidebooks suggest pleasant walks along tree-lined streets of what has now become a peaceful residential neighbourhood.

However, the north-west corner of this tranquil *arrondissement* harbours a dark secret: it is the site of an infamous tragedy that took place in the middle of World War Two and changed the lives of France's Jewish population for ever. Long suppressed in the cultural memory of the nation, it took the French several decades to fully come to terms with the events. Known as 'La Grande Rafle du Vel' d'Hiv (or simply the Vel' d'Hiv), the raid is named after the glass-domed sports arena (the Vel' d'Hiv, short for Vélodrome d'Hiver, or Winter Cycling Stadium) where, after a massive roundup of Jews in Paris, the families were deposited and left to suffer miserably without food, water or proper sanitation for a week. From there they were sent in boxcars to French detention camps either in the suburb of Drancy, or Beaune-la-Rolande and Pithiviers in the Loiret 100 kilometres to the south, where the children were separated from their anguished mothers, before being sent in separate convoys to their deaths in Auschwitz. On 16 and 17 July 1942, a total of 13,152 people (including 5,919 women and 4,115 children) were arrested by French police and detained in the Vel' d'Hiv, exactly six months after Adolph Eichmann presented his Final Solution for the eradication of Europe's Jews at Wannsee. Fewer than a hundred returned and none of the children who arrived at Auschwitz survived. Several factors make the Vel' d'Hiv significant: the raid (called 'Operation Spring Wind' by its organisers) was entirely carried out by French police; the totals are staggering; women and children were arrested for the very first time; and, most important, the first trains from the west to the death camps of Auschwitz came from the Vel' d'Hiv, sealing its inaugural position in the Nazi machinery of destruction.[2]

For years, the site of the velodrome (destroyed in 1959) remained an obscure part of the urban landscape. A single photograph exists from the day of the raid, a shot of unoccupied buses lined up by the stadium entrance, in a vision of haunting emptiness. Post-war orders to destroy all records of the roundup enacted a policy of organised amnesia. Today at this site on the rue Nélaton, in full view of the Eiffel Tower, the Ministry of the Interior has its offices. Around the corner, a small plaque calls for remembrance. President François Mitterrand commissioned a more visible monument on the Quai de Grenelle, where a sculpture by Holocaust survivor Walter Spitzer depicts a group of deportees on the stadium floor. But Mitterrand fed the popular myth by blaming the Nazi invader and constructing an ideal, resisting French Republic. In 1995, at the square de la place du Martyr Juif, newly elected president Jacques Chirac asserted France's responsibility: 'France, home of the Enlightenment and of Human Rights, land of refuge and asylum … upon that day committed an irreparable act.' 70 years after the roundup, President François Hollande fully acknowledged national complicity: 'The truth is that a crime was committed in France, by France.'[3] Five years later on 17 July 2017, on the 75th anniversary of the events, President Emmanuel Macron again denounced the role of the French state in the Vel' d'Hiv atroticities.

Site of infamy, the Vel' d' Hiv has become shorthand for the particularly brutal way that France participated in the Shoah. The cinematic memory of that dark chapter has been necessarily vexed; across seven decades only five feature films have treated the subject, and of them only two, the most recent, take us inside the stadium walls. The three films discussed here trace the representational history of the Vel' d'Hiv from the eyewitness account of a non-Jew – *Les Guichets du Louvre/Black Thursday* (Michel Mitrani, 1974) – to symbolic allegory of anti-Semitism, paranoia and identity – *Monsieur Klein/Mr. Klein* (Joseph Losey, 1976) – and finally to a detailed, historically accurate narrative culled from histories, documents and testimonies – *La Rafle/The Roundup* (Roselyne Bosch, 2010).[4]

The analyses both traverse occupied Paris and trace the cinematic figuration of the Vélodrome d'Hiver. First there is the Jewish Quarter in the Marais in *Les Guichets du Louvre*, where the roundup is woven into a *Bildungsroman* of young love. And, while the tragic hunt with its historical signifiers (the police, the buses, the Jews with their yellow stars and suitcases) is integral to the story, the stadium itself is neither seen nor mentioned. Next there are the luxurious hotels, cafés and auction houses of the 7th *arrondissement*, plus seedy Pigalle and its shadowy corners in *Monsieur Klein*, where the creation of a claustrophobic atmosphere of mysterious anxiety combines with the organised anti-Semitism of the raid, and we have glimpses of an unidentified stadium associated with the roundup. Finally, in *La Rafle*, we are inside the Vélodrome d'Hiver itself (and in the camp) where most of the action takes place, while the film begins with the popular working-class quarter of Montmartre and ends with the incongruously fashionable Hôtel Lutetia in the 6th *arrondissement* where shattered families try to regroup after the war.[5]

All three films emphasise the role of the French police and dramatise Jewish subjectivity; all seek to redress the official history. Each filmmaker evokes the horror in a way that awakens public consciousness, and each uses different representational strategies to portray not only the roundup, but also French complicity and the atmosphere of indifference that surrounded it. Each director's era frames what can be historically articulated, from the first evocation of the forbidden in *Les Guichets du Louvre*, through the burgeoning fascination with the Occupation years in *Monsieur Klein*,[6] to the present era of research, enlightenment and responsibility that grounds the specific historical project of *La Rafle*. These films share one disturbing aspect of the Vel' d'Hiv: while none of the Jews knew their terrible fate, all three filmmakers are painfully aware of the destination of death. Thus, each director finds a way to keep the shadow of Auschwitz always hovering at the interstices in their depictions of the Vel' d'Hiv.

Les Guichets du Louvre

In 1960, 18 years after the roundup, Roger Boussinot, a 20-year-old student at the time of the arrests, published his memoir of witnessing the raid and trying to save some Jews. Taking his title, *Les Guichets du Louvre*, from the portals of the museum through which he had hoped to lead them, Boussinot describes their unwillingness to follow him or to remove their yellow stars. He meets a young Jewish woman and something other than altruism begins to guide his efforts.[7] Both memoir and film end as she decides to turn away from imagined freedom towards the Jewish quarter where her mother and sister have disappeared. In 1974, the Bulgarian-French director Michel Mitrani transferred the subjective voice of the memoir into a narrative film, with Christian Rist as Paul and Christine Pascal as Jeanne, thus creating the first representation in film of the Vel' d'Hiv roundup. Where in the novel the narrating consciousness is the author himself, in the film it is the chaos of the roundup that speaks, giving full priority to the historic events.[8]

Boussinot begins: 'On July 16, at around four in the morning in a Paris still asleep, buses and vans with their bluish headlights left barracks, military camps, and depots and, despite the curfew, started toward the neighbourhoods of Belleville, Saint Paul, Popincourt, Poissonnière, and the Temple.'[9] Mitrani visually plunges us into Boussinot's scene, creating an air of disturbing tension even before the action starts: Paris, for its Jews, will be a city under siege. A delirious musical score in a minor key, a sort of *danse macabre*,[10] enhances this, as police vans race in darkness, gendarmes wordlessly pass around bread and fruit, and some glimpse Parisian sights while others stare blankly.

Paul begins his project in this tense atmosphere. Diverse encounters, vignettes of persecution, range across classes, denominations and generations of Jews; different configurations of arrested people articulate the tragedy of xenophobia. One common thread that links Jews who assert their Frenchness, those who obey religion and those

Alain Delon playing the eponymous ambiguous hero of *Monsieur Klein* (Joseph Losey, 1976) with 'glacial indifference'.

who simply feel that they have done nothing wrong is the belief that they will return to Paris.[11] The mystification is democratic – the French police believe this too. Jeanne's presence changes Paul from observer to participant; they are now both on the run. The organised sweep of this Jewish neighbourhood continues throughout the film, with mixed bystander reactions ranging from 'Good riddance' to 'Pour souls'. Most disturbing is the looting – everything from furniture to coveted sewing machines – by the good French citizens, who appreciate the 'cleansing' that the arrests bring. City buses filled with Jews cross the Marais, while posters of Marshall Pétain claim, 'Work, Family, Country', to be interpreted as reassuring or threatening, depending on identity.

The film's dramatic apex is the removal of Jeanne's yellow star, the badge of discrimination, to which she clings as if it were a talisman.[12] Without this identity, despised or not, Jeanne seems even more desperate and confused. Still, even without the star, Jeanne performs her Jewish identity when she sings a Yiddish lullaby to an abandoned baby. She refuses to tell Paul her name until the very end of the film, when, hesitating on the bridge, she decides to return to the place where the star is most prominent, the Marais, to find her mother and sister. Rather than a move towards victimisation, as some have claimed, this is a courageous assertion of Jewish identity in the midst of those who would deny it.[13] Mitrani's film conveys the fear and panic of that day from the dual perspective of a sympathetic Frenchman and a Jewish woman, while the spectre of the first destination, the Vélodrome d'Hiver, is an absent presence that haunts every action.

Monsieur Klein

In *Monsieur Klein*, Joseph Losey takes a very different approach, for as he famously said, 'I've always detested naturalism.'[14] While the film is a profound meditation on French anti-Semitism and government-ordered exclusion, Losey is careful to avoid literal representation, choosing the symbolic and conceptual over the historically specific. He explained, 'This film is not a precise reconstitution of the Grande Rafle. It's an attempt to grasp the essence of this period and the events that it produced, in the form of a documented moral fable, as a warning.'[15] While the Vel' d'Hiv took place in mid-July, the raid in the film occurs in midwinter; while the actual velodrome was enclosed and tragically disorganised, the film depicts an outdoor stadium with barbed wire and alphabetical sections; while the Vel' d'Hiv was in west-central Paris and requisitioned buses carried the prisoners to transit camps where they were then put on trains to Auschwitz, in the film the trains leading to Auschwitz are right next to the stadium and the stadium is at Vincennes on the eastern outskirts of Paris. Additionally, day turns to night rapidly, completely frustrating the logical sense of time spent in the stadium. Scripted by Franco Solinas, *Monsieur Klein* references the Vel' d'Hiv in order to examine the mechanisms of racial prejudice. An atmosphere of uneasy mystery is created by emblematic scenes of police preparations for the roundup, puzzling because they seem unrelated to the central plot. By the time we see the stadium and its captives at the very end of the film, these previously unrelated shots become imbued with narrative meaning.

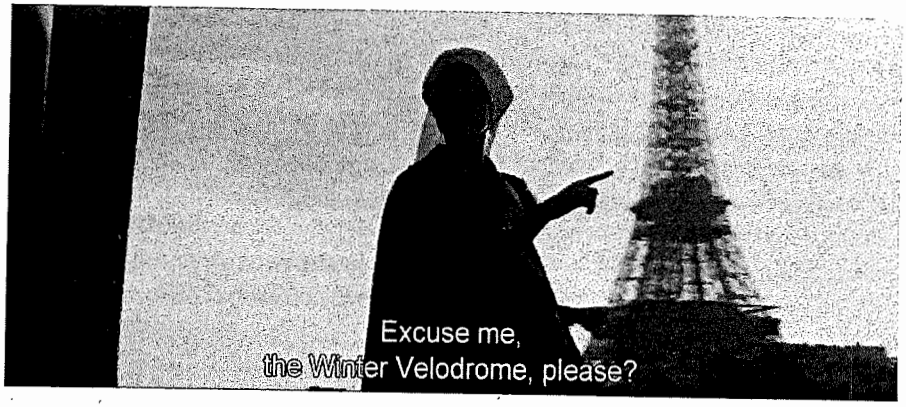
Losey also stated that the central theme of the film is 'indifference ... the inhumanity of the French towards sections of their own people',[16] while its images have been described as palpably evoking 'the black machine of the Occupation, implacable and

infernal'.[17] To reinforce this double move from history to moral fable, a title at the beginning of the film states: 'Mr Klein is a fictitious character, a composite of the experiences of many individuals. The facts are a matter of history. They took place in France in 1942.'[18] Specificity of dates, generality of experience: *Monsieur Klein* embodies 'the political numbness of a population that … enabled intolerance and racism to turn into institutionalized murder'.[19] Nowhere is the indifference more evident than in the last moments of the film when the roundup is fully portrayed; people obliviously continue their shopping at the marketplace, a note thrown from a bus is ignored and the sight of terrified Jews on city buses garners no response.

In the film, the atmosphere of anxiety is constructed through a dual series of narrative images. The first is an enigmatic exploration of Jewish identity through the story of one Robert Klein (played with glacial indifference by Alain Delon),[20] an art dealer who lives in luxury while he profits from desperate Jews selling family heirlooms. He finds himself confused with another Robert Klein, Jewish and invisible, and becomes obsessed with meeting his mysterious doppelgänger, if only to prove the case of mistaken religion. When he finally and unexpectedly merges with him in the chaos of the roundup, he is unable to extricate himself from the crowd of Jews. In his search, he encounters the other Klein's seedy lodgings and his concierge, a strange tapestry representing indifference and remorse, an anti-Semitic cabaret performance, a mysterious chateau sheltering wealthy Jews who later escape to Mexico, and other unyielding locations. All the while he is intent on proving his 'French French' heritage (he is actually Alsatian of several generations) with the help of his lawyer friend Pierre (Michael Lonsdale). But as he gets closer to this proof, the further he gets from his original grand bourgeois identity, and the closer he gets to assuming the identity of the debased other. Alexandre Trauner's haunting art direction constructs places bathed in dusk or twilight; the claustrophobic interiors, the labyrinth of dark streets or alleyways, the shadows, mirrors and polished surfaces all indicate a world destabilised by uncertainty.[21]

The second strand of the narrative appears throughout the film in momentary, puzzling scenes interspersed with Klein's story. There is no apparent connection between these and Klein until the end, when the two strands finally meet in the panic of the roundup, and both he and the other Klein are herded into a boxcar. The two are finally taken for one – a Jew. This strand is made up of iconic scenes of preparations for the roundup – officials plan with a large map of Paris, gendarmes and secret police prepare the stadium, clerks assemble addresses of Jewish families on index cards, black cars drop off groups of officers in the Paris streets, they prepare staging areas. Often these are accompanied by eerie electronic chords of a threatening nature in an evocative score composed by Egisto Macchi.[22]

At the very end of the film when Klein is absorbed into the doomed crowd, the definition of Jewish identity seems to be primarily 'someone designated for death'. The yellow stars are visible everywhere. Robert Klein, having been divested of every material thing in his luxurious apartment at 136 rue du Bac (7th *arrondissement*), now definitively taken for a Jew by the police who arrest him, is compelled to follow the man who answers to his name into the stadium. With a futile 'I'll be back' to Pierre, who has the documents that could save him, Klein finds himself crammed in a boxcar with the



Annette Monod (Mélanie Laurent), the 'heroic Protestant nurse' in *La Rafle/The Roundup* (Roselyne Bosch, 2010).

desperate Jewish client we saw him swindle at the beginning of the film, now with a prominent Star of David on his coat. In an atmosphere described as 'more hallucinatory than historical',[23] the Jewish bodies destined for annihilation act as a response to the full corporeality of the stark, puzzling sequence that opens the film: a frightened middle-aged woman, naked before the cold eye of a bureaucrat, is examined like a horse or other beast, to determine if she is Jewish. Measurements taken, posture observed, teeth and nostrils examined, the result is 'inconclusive'. And the question that haunts the film – 'What is a Jew?' – continues to hover, unanswered, as it ends, while it solemnly dramatises 'the disappearance of the Jewish body from the European scene'.[24]

La Rafle

La Rafle takes a third approach to the tragic events of July 1942 with its focus on children and its comprehensive historical form. There were 4,115 Jewish children arrested in the Vel' d'Hiv; only a tiny number of them survived.[25] These arrests set a horrifying precedent by putting every Jewish child at risk. Some historians refer to this organised infanticide as the 'Massacre of the Innocents'.[26] Moved by the specific tragedy of the children, Roselyne Bosch made *La Rafle* out of a desire to tell the story from their point of view.[27] She also wanted to describe the Vel' d'Hiv from the inside, believing that fiction can reveal truths unavailable to the documentary form.[28] She created a fictional account of true events, and prefaced her film with a statement that historicises it. 'All of the events in this film, even the most extreme, truly occurred in the summer of 1942.'[29] She developed a sort of epic mosaic that represents both the historical and subjective realities of the Vel' d'Hiv through a multifaceted view of intersecting destinies: the increasingly difficult life of Jewish families; the commitment of some of the French to helping them; the crowded, anguished suffering in the hellish stadium; the bargaining Vichy and Nazi officials (even Hitler himself) responsible for the decision to deport the children; the horrific life in limbo at the detention camp; the terrifying barbarity of the separation of mothers from children; and the tragic return of the few survivors after the war.

Concerned with historical realism, Bosch consulted many sources, among them Blanche Finger and William Karel's influential *Opération 'Vent Printanier'*.[30] It provided two of her main characters: Joseph Weismann (Hugo Leverdez), who, as an 11-year-old, managed to escape from Beaune-La-Rolande and, while he lost his entire family, survived both the Vel' d'Hiv and the Loiret camp; and Annette Monod (Mélanie Laurent), a heroic Protestant nurse who showed tremendous compassion and courage by caring for the children at the Vel' d'Hiv, Beaune-La-Rolande and the Hôtel Lutetia.[31] A third main character, Dr David Sheinbaum (Jean Reno), is a composite, while most of the other characters and incidents have analogues in specific accounts; every single episode can be historically documented.

One can say that the film's main character is actually the Vel' d'Hiv, for most of the action takes place during the roundup and its aftermath. But before Jewish families are torn apart, the film places us in the vibrant immigrant community of Montmartre where both Yiddish and French are spoken, while Jewish life is increasingly restricted.[32] Jo, star marked 'Juif' on his sweater, goes to school, where the children sing allegiance to Marshall Pétain. Our first vision of Jo thus evokes the contradictory struggle of Jewish children who must revere the source of their exclusion. Sequences in Montmartre introduce other families, while some scenes convey moments of sublime tenderness (Shabbat, bedtime) that rewrite the iconic clichés of Jewish victimhood by substituting real human qualities for the familiar emaciated forms in prison garb. Soon after Montmartre goes to sleep to the soft music of Chopin and soundtrack composer Christian Henson,[33] all are abruptly awakened by the swarms of police who have come to arrest the families. The horror of the roundup, with its scenes of chaos and panic, is depicted from within the action: suicides, looting, brutality, hostile bystanders (and some who are sympathetic), tears, pleas, anger, resignation.

We are introduced to the infamous interior of the Vel' d'Hiv as nurse Annette Monod enters; her shock is ours. An overhead shot provides a startling view of the confusion and chaos, filth and degradation, as thousands of people are crammed into the stadium without food, water or sanitation. 'Eyewitness testimony to the horror of the Vel' d'Hiv abounds … A Red Cross nurse later recalled: "The atmosphere was stuffy and nauseating: nervous breakdowns, shouting, weeping of children and even of adults who were at the end of their tether."'[34] Amid this squalor and despair, acts of heroism and conscience were in fact possible. Anna Traube brazenly leaves by having plumber Gaston Roques write a pass.[35] Her escape to freedom, past the Eiffel Tower, repeats Monod's original entry in reverse. Compassionate firemen turn on hoses to aid people literally dying of thirst. They post letters, scribbled in haste and hope.[36] The exhausted Annette and Dr Sheinbaum develop a friendship, and when finally the Jews are let out of the Vel' d'Hiv, only to be imprisoned in the transit camps, Annette decides, out of conscience and love for the children, that she will go with them.

Even though in the open, Beaune-La-Rolande is not much better, surrounded by barbed wire and watchtowers, its captives nearly starved. Still, there are moments of lightness as when Annette procures madeleines and a makeshift picnic takes place. However, this is a prelude to perhaps the worst horror of the Shoah in France: the

separation of the mothers and children. Permission to deport the young children had not yet arrived from Berlin, so a decision to send parents and older children was made; the younger ones would follow later. The decision to leave the children behind in the camp produces the most dramatic event of the film. Beatings, hosings, machine guns, traumatic cries of agony abound as pure terror accompanies the separations, and once again this is depicted from within the action.[37] Finally, at the Hôtel Lutetia, Annette Monod is unexpectedly reunited with Jo, who has found kind adoptive parents, and with little Nono, who, traumatised and mute, is the image of the tragedy of the Vel' d'Hiv.[38]

Testament

What can be said of the cinematic legacy of the Vel' d'Hiv? There is certainly the obligation to remember, the continued desire to tell the truth of France's complicity in the Shoah. These three films, *Les Guichets du Louvre*, *Monsieur Klein* and *La Rafle*, have begun the task of representation, as the last of the eyewitnesses disappears. Each film's strategies contribute a perspective, from the symbolic, to the more abstract and thought-provoking, to a scrupulously detailed realism. Each film succeeds in tearing a bit of the blindfold away. And, unexpectedly, they have also provided us with a modicum of hope. Today, the Vel' d'Hiv remains an excruciating symbol of one of the most tragic moments in French history. Yet a proud antithesis to this icon of terror can be found in some images of women of indomitable strength depicted in these films. In *Les Guichets du Louvre*, Jeanne's return to the Marais is an act of defiance and an assertion of her Jewish identity. She bravely claims her part in the community of Jews in the face of an unknown fate. In *Monsieur Klein*, this strength comes unexpectedly in the form of the unnamed Jewish woman who maintains her composure during the brusque and humiliating physical examination. Of the many reactions one might have in this situation, this silent resignation is a kind of strength. And *La Rafle* gives us an array of admirable women, from Anna Traube and Annette Monod, whose bravery and commitment existed in reality, to Jo's anguished mother Sura, who at the moment of deepest sorrow, the separation, breaks from the tormented crowd to make sure Jo will escape and tell the world. Today, nothing remains of the Vélodrome d'Hiver in the 15th *arrondissement*. The Eiffel Tower, immutable, stands watch as the Seine flows languidly by, past the statue, plaque and monument that silently enjoin us to remember. They are easily ignored. But the increased visibility of this forgotten place, brought into focus by the gradual cinematic representation of the Vel' d'Hiv, echoes the growing recognition of its role in history. Finally, these films give voice to the impossible perceptions of vanished lives and in so doing begin the reciprocal work of memory and representation so necessary to the recovery of these traumatic Parisian sites.

Notes

1. *Nelles Paris Guide* (Munich: Nelles Verlag GmbH, 1996), p. 115.
2. Two of the most useful summaries of the Vel' d'Hiv roundup can be found in Robert Paxton and Michael Marrus, *Vichy France and the Jews* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), and Susan Zuccotti, *The Holocaust, the French, and the Jews* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

with the octogenarian Joseph Weismann that Bosch was able to write her scenario in the style she wished. Weismann was able to write his own memoir, *Après la rafle*, after the film's release.

32. A quarter of the children in the Vel' d'Hiv came from Montmartre. Press book, p. 17. The German ordinance of 8 July forbade Jews from going to public places such as parks, cinemas, theatres, libraries, museums, cafes or restaurants. Zuccotti, *The Holocaust, the French, and the Jews*, p. 93. The list was expanded to include concert halls, swimming pools, beaches, exhibitions, historic monuments, sporting events, racecourses, campgrounds and even phone booths.
33. This British composer has created music for 45 films and worked with Brian Eno and Steve Reich.
34. Zuccotti, *The Holocaust, the French, and the Jews*, p. 111. Also on that page is a description of Sarah Castel, then aged 5: 'Those cries of grief, of horror, of fear, in my spirit as a young child, the memory of those cries, that horrible odor, the tears of the children and that constant blue light day and night.'
35. Anna Traube's memoir, *Evadée du Vel' d'Hiv'*, was published in 2005 in the Collection Témoignages de la Shoah. In the film she is played by Adèle Exarchopoulos.
36. Some of these letters were recently found and published as *Je vous écris du Vél' d'Hiv*, introduced by Karen Taib (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2011).
37. 'They waged war against children because they were Jewish. Do you know of any civilization capable of such cruelty? It is inhuman to make children suffer so.' Joseph Weismann in Finger and Karel, *'Vent Printanier'*, p. 82.
38. 'My whole life was overwhelmed and shaped by that roundup of the Vel' d'Hiv, that has left so few traces in people's memory, about which they seldom speak.' Annette Monod, in Finger and Karel, *'Vent Printanier'*, p. 194. As for Nono, he is based on a little boy who became Annette's protégé. Annette Monod, quoted in Zuccotti, *The Holocaust, the French, and the Jews*, p. 114, and in Lévy and Tillard, *La Grande Rafle du Vel d'Hiv*, p. 159.