H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Raymond-Raoul Lambert. *Diary of a Witness, 1940-1943.* Edited with an introduction by Richard I. Cohen. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 2007. lxvi + 221 pp. $27.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-56663-740-4.

Reviewed by Samuel Goodfellow (Westminster College [Fulton])

Published on H-German (June, 2008)

The Participating Witness

Hundreds of Jewish diaries from the war years have survived–some extensive, such as Viktor Klemperer's *I Will Bear Witness* (1995), and others mere fragments. Undoubtedly, thousands more were obliterated. Those that remain are powerful testimonies to individual Jews' perceptions of the impending catastrophe as it relentlessly constricted their options. Raymond-Raoul Lambert's diary ranks as one of the most significant, not only because of its relative completeness, but because Lambert was a major figure in the French Jewish community during the Vichy years. As a leader in the Union GÃ©nÃ©rale des IsraÃ©lites de France (UGIF)–the French version of the eastern European *JudenrÃ¤te*–Lambert was in constant contact with Vichy and German officials and key notable French Jews. His was a key vantage point from which to witness what happened to Jews in France during the war.

Lambert came to age during World War I and he repeatedly evokes his experience at Chemin des Dames in 1917 to remind himself that he offered his all for France and, perhaps, to put his suffering in perspective. He earned the Croix de Guerre for his action in 1917, and he was appointed subsequently to the Legion of Honor. During the interwar years he became a civil servant and then, in the 1930s, he worked with Jewish refugees, gaining the requisite experience for his work after 1941. When war broke out, he was mobilized.

For Lambert, the loss of the war was a profound humiliation; France had failed live up to his expectations. Lambert tried to explain the defeat as the result of poor military preparedness, a lack of political will to go to war, and a lack of moral engagement. Forced south into the unoccupied zone, Lambert became the director of the southern branch of UGIF, through which he hoped to ameliorate conditions for all Jews. Created by the Germans, membership in UGIF was compulsory for all Jews in France and served as the link between the Jewish community and the Vichy and German authorities. Lambert saw his role as humanitarian, and indeed, UGIF was the only way to provide assistance to Jews systematically. The cost was high, however, as Lambert spent much of his time negotiating with men like Xavier Vallat, head of the Commissariat gÃ©nÃ©ral aux questions juives and later the virulently antisemitic Louis Darquier de Pellepoix.

That this was an impossible situation became clear in August 1943 when Vichy authorities decided to remove all foreign Jews from the unoccupied zone. Lambert met with Pierre Laval, prime minister of Vichy, to no avail, and returned to the refugee camp at Les Milles, where he participated in the expulsion of 260 Jews to Paris and ultimately to Auschwitz. His description of the "heartrending spectacle" (p. 138) is eloquent in its impotence. Lambert was unable to do more than record the last wishes of the deportees and save a few Jews from deportation.

Lambert clearly defined himself as both a Frenchman and a Jew. Both were more than just identities; indeed, they represented virtues for which Lambert was willing to sacrifice himself. Indeed, Lambert refused to use his extensive contacts and flee with his family to safety, despite his fear of the immediate future, because of his loyalty to both France and the Jewish community. The German defeat and occupation of France, however, raised the question of whether the French, when pushed, would show equal loyalty to Jews. Despite the continued support of many of his friends, Vichy's antisemitic legislation challenged Lambert's view of France. Initially, he attributed the measures to German influence and complained about the French failure to stand firm on principle. Gradually, French complicity in the repressive Statut des juifs became impossible to ignore. Towards the end of the journal, he wonders what will become of his children and whether they will be able to share his pride in being French.

Lambert had extensive contact throughout with Vichy authorities, many of them quite antisemitic. His relations with Vallat seemed relatively cordial, although Vallat was clearly responsible for implementing, and often even writing, much of Vichy's early antisemitic legislation. Marcel Bucard, notorious for founding the interwar Franciste movement, embraced Lambert in a brief encounter (p.113). Early in the occupation, Lambert seemed to pin his hopes on Vichy, and he apparently shared an intense patriotism with many of the Vichy elite. The appointment of Darquier de Pellepoix and the German occupation of southern France, however, eroded his faith in Vichy.

At the same time his relations with the Jewish authorities were not smooth. In particular, Lambert and Jacques Heilbronner, president of the Consistory, disliked each other. Lambert expressed impatience with the Jewish religious authorities and had a penchant for affirming the righteousness of all his decisions. Jewish leadership was dangerously fragmented. As a secular, deeply patriotic French Jew who admired the writings of Maurice BarrÃ¨s, Lambert occupied a complicated ideological space between right-wing veterans such as Bucard and the diverse Jewish perspective.

Richard I. Cohen suggests in his excellent introduction that by 1943 Lambert had become quietly involved in the resistance. Precious little evidence of this survives, although it is certainly plausible. If so, then Lambert was caught in an even deeper set of ambiguities, indirectly assisting the authorities in implementing the deportation of Jews at the same time sponsoring violent resistance to Vichy. On August 21, 1943, Lambert and his family were arrested and sent to Drancy, a clearing house for deportation east. They languished there until the end of 1943, when they perished in Auschwitz.

Lambert's journal has long been available in French. It deserves to be read in conjunction with other significant diaries and chronicles such as those by Viktor Klemperer, Anne Frank, and the anonymous contributors to the Lodz Chronicle. These direct accounts, untainted by the uncertainty of memory, are harrowing. We know the outcome of the narrative; they do not, at least not at first. Each new event, each tightening of the noose, is incremental to them and elicits despair and hope. In his last letter dated in November 1943 from Drancy, Lambert expresses hope that the war will end soon, while at the same time he begs for coats for his family. Lambert's account is riveting because it reveals his personal response to events, the confusion of the Jewish community, the complexity of relations between Vichy and the Jews, and the relentlessness of the Holocaust.