

Élisabeth Gille (1937–1996) was born in Paris, the daughter of Michael Epstein, a banker, and of the novelist Irène Némirovsky. In 1942, both parents were deported to Auschwitz, where they died, but Gille and her older sister, Denise, lived out the duration of World War II in hiding. Gille worked for many years as an editor and translator, especially of science fiction, and she was over fifty when her first book, *The Mirador*, appeared and was immediately recognized as a major achievement. Before her death she also published *Le Crabe sur la banquette arrière* (*The Crab in the Backseat*), a mordantly funny examination of people's responses to her battle with cancer, and a short novel that reflects her and her sister's life in the years after their parents' disappearance, *Un paysage de cendres*, translated into English as *Shadows of a Childhood*.

Marina Harss is a translator and dance writer living in New York City. Her recent translations include Mariolina Venezia's *Been Here a Thousand Years*, Alberto Moravia's *Conjugal Love*, Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Stories from the City of God*, and Dino Buzzati's *Poem Strip* (NYRB Classics).

THE MIRADOR: DREAMED MEMORIES OF IRÈNE NÉMIROVSKY BY HER DAUGHTER

By **Élisabeth Gille**

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"*The Mirador* approaches the ambiguity in Némirovsky's life and work in a profound and empathetic way. Gille is not interested in defending her mother's reputation. Instead, she sets out to live in her mother's head." —Alice Kaplan, *The Nation*

ABOUT THIS BOOK

The Mirador is a most unusual book. It is a fictionalized memoir, written by the daughter of Irène Némirovsky.

Élisabeth Gille, was only five years old when her mother was arrested by the Gestapo and taken to Auschwitz, never to be seen by Gille again. With *The Mirador*, Gille attempts to come to understand the mother she never had a chance to know. She "becomes" Némirovsky, writing in her mother's voice, to explore her mother's childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood—starting in Kiev and St. Petersburg, passing through Moscow, and ending up in France, where Némirovsky finally feels at home. Gille explores her mother's relationship with her own parents: the jealous mother who babies her and the serious father who prizes her intellect but never pays her enough attention to keep her happy.

As much as *The Mirador* functions as a personal history, though, it is also a political one. Gille weaves her mother's life story throughout the tumult of Europe during the first half of the twentieth century. Némirovsky and her parents flee Russia after the Revolution; and it is in the Holocaust that she, who has never identified strongly with her Jewish heritage, meets her tragic end. The extraordinary compassion with which Gille embarks on this labor of love—channeling her mother, without sentimentalizing her faults—culminates in a book that is truly unlike any other.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. The French word "mirador" literally means a watchtower. Having read the book, what significance do you think this title takes on?
2. Gille begins her mother's story with the birth of her daughter; she imagines Némirovsky thinking of her own mother during this time, making a single, small maternal gesture [p. 12]. Why does Gille start the story this way?
3. How would you characterize Irène as a child? Did you find her to be a believable child? Why or why not? What about a likeable one?
4. Throughout the book, starting on page 25, Gille takes little breaks from the memories she imagines for her mother in order to interject with small moments from her own personal history. Why? Why are they written in a removed register—third-person accounts of "the child"—while the rest of the book is written in an intimate first person? In what ways do Gille's childhood and her mother's align? In what ways do they diverge?

OTHER NYRB CLASSICS OF INTEREST

Renoir, My Father, Jean Renoir (introduction by Robert L. Herbert)

The Snows of Yesteryear, Gregor von Rezzori (introduction by John Banville)

Memoirs of an Anti-Semite, Gregor von Rezzor (introduction by Deborah Eisenberg)

A Sorrow Beyond Dreams, Peter Handke (introduction by Jeffrey Eugenides)

Moura, Nina Berberova

The Life of Henry Brulard, Stendhal (preface by Lydia Davis)

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Irène Némirovsky, *David Golder*

Irène Némirovsky, *The Dogs and the Wolves*

Irène Némirovsky, *All Our Worldly Goods*

Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything is Illuminated*

Anne Carson, *Nox*

Anna Akhmatova, *Requiem*

Olivier Philipponnat, *The Life of Irene Némirovsky: 1903–1942*

- Discuss Irène's doll incident [p. 50]. Why is she so offended by this gift from her parents? "That my grandfather, with whom I had spent so many hearty hours 'among men,' in places forbidden to children and especially to little girls, and, even worse, that my father, whom I constantly sought to impress with my precocious observations, could have been so blind, was truly intolerable," she laments. Why does she feel more comfortable with men, and in male spaces?
- How are Irène's parents depicted in the novel? Given Irène's high esteem for her intellectual father, and disdain for her mother's shallowness, does it seem surprising these two people could have a happy marriage? Do you think Gille's own complicated feelings about her grandmother—who refused to accept her and her sister as granddaughters even after they survived the Holocaust—play into her characterization of the woman? Did you feel any sympathy towards her?
- Chapter 6 begins with a striking statement—"Because of the Bolsheviks, I never celebrated my fifteenth birthday"—and throughout the book, Gille focuses on how the quotidian details of her mother's life were affected by the historic events through which she lived. Does the character of Irène, as imagined by Gille, have the self-awareness to realize that her concerns about, for example, her fifteenth birthday, might seem petty when situated in the grand scope of history? Does Gille?
- Why does Gille choose to write her mother's memoirs in two parts—the first set in November 1929 and the second in June 1942? What is she able to accomplish using this division that she wouldn't have if she had written the book straight through? At the outset of Part II, Irène confesses to making "the mistake of rereading the rubbish I wrote at the age of twenty-six" [p. 147]. Why this disdain for her earlier words? Is it warranted?
- Class plays an important role in the novel; Irène grows up in very luxurious surroundings. The Russian Revolution is personal to her, since the rise of the Bolsheviks could mean the dismantling of her family fortune. She isn't afraid of the Nazis until it's too late, in part because she so strongly identifies as a member of Parisian society. Is Irène blinded by her own social class? How might the book be different if she had grown up middle-class, or a peasant?
- Irène's uneasy relationship with her Jewish heritage is established early on: "In short, the Jews of the lower district scared me and made me uncomfortable," she writes [p. 30]. Later, she expresses sympathy for the Gestapo soldiers in her neighborhood: "I feel sorry for these young men" [p. 180]. Why doesn't Irène identify with her heritage? Would things have been easier for Irène and her children if she had felt more Jewish? Might she have taken measures to protect her family against the Nazis?
- "In February 1939... I decided to be baptized," explains Irène [p. 204]. Did you read this decision as a cowardly one (renouncing her family heritage), a brave one (attempting to protect her family), or some combination of both? Why doesn't she do it earlier? Would it have mattered?
- Gille writes in her acknowledgements: "This book was imagined on the basis of other books. Firstly, those of my mother, Irène Némirovsky... I add that though this book has been 'dreamed,' the letters and all citations by Irène Némirovsky come from unpublished notes, and are authentic. A few of her phrases have also slipped, like marks of love, into my writing" [p. 221–3]. After studying her mother's books, photographs, and notes, Gille wrote *The Mirador*; how close do you think the events and emotions it describes actually come to the reality of Irène's life? Do you think Gille is fair in her depiction of her mother?

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