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The Diaries of a 'Jeune Fille en Fleurs'

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The Diaries of a “*Jeune Fille en Fleurs*”
Michèle Cahen Cone, Bryn Mawr, ‘51

Anyone who has read Marcel Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu* will no doubt remember his description of a covey of attractive young girls whose circle the narrator sought to enter during his summers on the Normandy coast at the turn of the 20th century. He caught sight of them at the beach, or walking along the jetty, or returning on bicycles from a tennis game; he also saw them as they danced in pairs at afternoon teas. To my amazement, my French grandmother Alice Gerson, a teenager in 1900, might have been a source for one of his characters. Cabourg, the fashionable Normandy coast resort frequented by Proust and renamed Balbec in his novel, is also where a young Alice and her family spent their summers around the same time, according to the diaries entitled “*Impressions journalières*” that Alice kept between 1900 and 1906.

Even if Alice did not fall under the gaze of Marcel Proust, her stays in Cabourg and Proust’s fiction in the “*Jeunes filles en fleurs*” section of *Recherche* revel in a similar atmosphere: vacation time in a hotel frequented by a mix of guests, some of them famous yet accessible. One scene in the diary describes a gathering in the salon of the hotel where Alice, her mother and older brother are staying on a day of such bad weather that going to the beach is out of the question. She writes: “An old lady who was there, a famous composer, started to play the piano. She played magnificently.” Soon the woman was inviting Alice to play also. “Trembling with fear I played Chopin’s Second Nocturne. She told me I was gifted, that I played with feeling and must work on my fingers. From this moment on she took me into her bosom, and gave me advice. She had been the pianist of the Queen of England and of several princesses.” (Vol. 1, October 2, 1900, p. 27) Mrs. MacKenzie found a music teacher for Alice, a young woman named Marie de l’Isle, who befriended Alice, and who, as we learn in another section of the diaries, sang at the Dieppe Casino near Cabourg during a summer when Alice was there.

In fact, Alice may well have rubbed shoulders with Proust when she met the composer Reynaldo Hahn, his close friend and lover, at the Dieppe Casino where her teacher had just performed: “As she [Marie de l’Isle] had asked us to do,” writes Alice, “the three of us (she, her mother and her older brother) went back stage to see her and to compliment her. The divine musician was there, chatting with her. The handsome, but all too arrogant Reynaldo was pouring compliments on her and, and after expressing regrets at her imminent departure, put a passionate, but such an affected kiss on her gloved hand...” “He is bizarre, this man, this greatly talented musician who poses as a handsome man rather than as an artist. I would see him often,” she continues, “in the company of Madeleine and Suzette Lemaire, wearing superbly magnificent yellow gloves, with such a blasé, tired air. He is truly the representation of his music, the music of the “*Chansons grises*,” with passionate impulses, gloomy despair and tireless refinement.” (Vol. 3, August 7, 1902, p. 113) Quite a portrait!

Beyond holidays at beach resorts, the diaries describe, from the point of view of a French teenager in a well to do Parisian family, what it was like to grow into womanhood under the constraints of a specific epoch and class, with a certain level of education, emotional maturity, intellectual and artistic gifts, ambitions, and family income. Alice’s mother successfully took over the wholesale business in “tresses,” or clothing trimmings, that her father had run until his death in 1898.

On that particular subject, one sees Alice going into feminist revolt against the family trustees who, because the law did not allow women to own a business, met monthly with her mother at her bank to make sure the business was doing well so they would not have to support her and her two children! Although Alice was not a revolutionary, evidence of feminist revolt surfaces throughout the diaries, whether the issue is her frustration at not pursuing her studies despite her love of literature and successes in school, or her views on the dowry attached to marriageable young girls, or her refusal to marry if she does not find the right candidate, even saying that if the man she wants to marry has no money, she will work.

The discovery of my grandmother Alice's diaries goes back to the time when Villa L'Entracte, the country house in the South of France where she had lived with her husband Jean Goldschmidt during most of the Second World War, was sold in 1978. As often happens during those moments, every last cupboard is opened, papers are sorted out, and in this case the diaries emerged. It had been seventy some years since any entry had been confided to its pages, thirty-eight years since they had travelled from Paris with the belongings that my grandparents had piled into their car as they fled the French capital ahead of the German army in 1940, and thirty-five years since the diaries had been left behind, locked in a corner cabinet of their bedroom at L'Entracte prior to a hurried departure in November 1943 for a more isolated hiding place where their tragic fate was sealed by their arrest. Alice and Jean perished, gassed at Auschwitz.

My young grandmother's handwriting is steady, slanted and shows very few erasures or scratches. The first volume has stains at the bottom, probably from humidity. When the diary begins in October 1900, some of her contemporaries are resuming school, but she has been told (by a mother whom she adores and dares not contradict) to prepare for matrimony. Her days are leisurely: she plays the piano, takes singing lessons, goes to weekly sewing bees where she meets with other girls her age. Not having to do homework, she has plenty of time to go to the 1900 Paris World's Fair, attend concerts and the theatre, go to classes at her old Lycée and to the Sorbonne as she is starved for more education.

She is quite opinionated on what she sees and hears, whether the subject is a performance of the play *L'Aiglon* by Edmond Rostand, with the famous Sarah Bernhardt playing Napoleon's son, a concert with the violinist Jacques Thibaud, or a lecture on poetry by a certain M. Lanson, probably Gustave Lanson, author of *L'Histoire de la Littérature Française*. Although she never goes anywhere without a chaperone, her life seems unusually free as far as partaking of the culture offered by turn-of-the-century Paris. More than the visual arts, music is her passion. Religion—she came from an assimilated French Jewish family—is hardly ever mentioned in the diaries, save for one ugly moment involving a drunken servant ranting against Jews.

Big moments unique to the epoch—the 1900 Paris World's Fair, the celebration of the centenary of Victor Hugo's birth—make it into the pages of the diaries. Her descriptions of travels with her mother, and in particular of a challenging excursion up Mont Blanc are truly fascinating. Not only does she give wonderful details of the impressive mountainous landscape around her, but her description of the climb of the Mont Blanc, with British tourists as company, suggests a budding journalist taking notes.

Besides offering a vignette of the day-to-day life of a privileged teenage girl, and its high points at the start of the new century, the diary is intriguing for uncovering the

evolving reactions of a *fin-de-siècle* proper young lady to the opposite sex. At first she behaves toward the prodigy Jacques Thibaud the way young girls in the 1960s did to the Beatles: She breaks through all barriers in order to see her hero at close range, and swoons when she thinks he has smiled at her.

Later on in the diary, when she visits relatives in Saint-Étienne on the occasion of a girl cousin's engagement, she feels for the first time attraction to a young man, a naval officer who talks to her frankly and seductively. Although she responds to him with feminist prudishness, she falls in love, and is disappointed not to see him on her second visit there for the cousin's wedding. Other suitors appear, each of whom she dismisses, including a married one whose infidelity upsets her. A brief and inconsequential passionate embrace with her music teacher Marie de l'Isle is hinted at.

Watching her reject one suitor after another, I cannot help but ask myself what my genes and my character would have been, had she chosen the naval officer or one of the other suitors she names rather than the man she did choose. As it is, I do recognize myself in her as a teenage girl, privileged by good looks and intelligence, but lacking the drive to push family demands away in order to fulfill herself. Thank you, Bryn Mawr College, for not letting Alice's granddaughter drift into becoming only a wife, a mother, and a grandmother the way she did.

Why people write diaries has a fairly simple answer. Diaries tend to be substitutes for the ideal listener for a lonely person. Anne Frank in her diary goes so far as to address her diary as "Kitty." Of course, when the diary is kept during times of duress, as was the case for Anne Frank in Holland during the Holocaust and for Héléne Berr in Paris during the same period, the writer is not only lonely by nature but made so by circumstance—the fear of going out and being recognized and arrested as a Jew.

Alice, who kept a diary during years immortalized as the Belle Époque for the well-heeled was not subject to the same horrible constraints as the two other Jewish female diarists mentioned above—at least not at the time when she was writing her diary. Her loneliness seems to have been caused by her inability to find in her circle either a soulmate or a role model. She loves to write, and in her own words, "my journal will be my true friend and a tombstone for my secrets." Vol 1, October 1, 1900, p. 13) Sadly, she did not read in the word "journal" the potential of journalism, where I think she would have excelled.

Why Alice stopped writing after she knew she was marrying my grandfather, why she retrieved the diaries in 1940, and why she left them behind at Villa L'Entracte in November 1943 can only be conjectured. Her silence after her marriage makes me think that she found enough satisfaction living with an intelligent and well-educated partner that she lost all personal ambition: My grandfather came from a family of grain traders and, though a Jew from Alsace, was smart enough to have been befriended by one of the most brilliant French men of his generation, the three-time prime minister of France, André Tardieu.

Alice's decision to take the diaries with her in June 1940, on a trip full of uncertainties about the future, suggests that the memories of her teens in Paris at the time of the Belle Époque were very precious to her. As for leaving the diaries behind at the worst stage of WWII when the most assimilated of French Jews faced arrest, it either expresses forgetfulness in panic, or the desire to leave her descendants evidence of who she had been before becoming a wife, a mother and a grandmother.

Even if I am wrong in my interpretation of Alice's behavior, her decisions offer insight into the person she became when I knew her as a fiftyish grandmother in the 1930s and early 1940s: an elegant lithe silhouette, an enigmatic though outgoing older woman with short dyed red hair and lines of worry imprinted on her still pretty face, a physique reminiscent of Marcel Proust's muse Oriane as he describes her in her last years, toward the end of his novel.