Engendering the Repatriation: The Return of Female Political Deportees to France Following the Second World War

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Still gravely ill from a severe beating, her body gaunt and head shaved, political deportee Simone Rohner was among a small group of women returning to France in the closing days of the Second World War mistakenly identified as *femmes tondues*, women whose heads had been shaved as punishment for their sexual liaisons with German soldiers. Profoundly affected by the incident, she wrote only months after her return:

Civilians looked at us with an air of disgust; some insults were flung at us. We looked at each other in surprise. What? France did not know about the deportees? . . . We had to endure scathing words, we cried in rage from it . . . we received a hostile reception . . . [and] we were shocked.¹

Freed in early April by advancing Allied troops, Rohner and her companions were among the first deportees returned to France, repatriated at a time when few had known of the approximately nine thousand female political prisoners deported from occupied France or of the conditions under which they had been held.²

¹ Individual dossier, Files of Germaine Tillion, Musée de la Résistance et de la Déportation, Besançon [hereafter Files of Germaine Tillion].
² Anise Postel-Vinay, "Essai de comptage des femmes déportées de France de 1941 à 1945," Files of Germaine Tillion; and Annette Wieviorka, *Déportation et génocide: Entre la mémoire et l'oubli* (Paris: Plon, 1992), 62-3. Citing the fear of reprisals for the prisoners and the unnecessary anxiety that inexact information would cause for their families, Henri Frenay, head of the Ministry for Prisoners, Deportees, and Refugees and charged with organizing and overseeing their return, had issued a censure decree banning dissemination
While the experience of Rohner and her companions cannot be viewed as typical, the shock and outrage she expressed in her unpublished 1945 memoir parallel the sentiments found in many women's accounts of the period. Almost all of the female deportees tell of undergoing a similar range of emotions once they returned home. After experiencing initial feelings of joy and exhilaration and a desire, above all, to return to a "normal life," many found themselves caught between two worlds. Psychologically unable to leave the camps and tormented still by the horrors seen and endured, they were, at the same time, enraged and disillusioned by the world to which they had returned – a world they had long idealized but one that now seemed foreign to them.

Of course, some of the deportees benefited from warm receptions and recalled fondly their great burst of pride on hearing the "Marseillaise" played the first time or of being met at the train station by General Charles de Gaulle. Overall, however, the female political deportees remembered the time surrounding their return as an extremely difficult phase in their transition from war to peace. Rather than being warmly received and welcomed home by a grateful nation, they wrote of returning to families and communities unable to comprehend or appreciate their sacrifice and suffering.

Some have since suggested that many women suppressed the memories of their deportation experiences, silenced individually when the difficulty of explaining their ordeal to family members became too great and silenced collectively when the public turned away for a lack of interest. Within months of the war's end, much of the public had lost interest in hearing the details of the camps. A nation already numbed following four years of foreign occupation found the camp survivors' stories incredible. Unable or unwilling to believe the accounts, an often indifferent

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public was not yet ready to hear their testimonies, and by 1947, editors no longer accepted the manuscripts of the deportees. Historian Annette Wieviorka aptly summarized the nation's initial quasi-denial of the deportation in the early postwar years with a statement that the deportees attributed to several editors: "Enough of cadavers! Enough of torture! Enough of stories of the resistance! We need to laugh now!"4

Returning women did not remain silent or suppress their memories, however. Their published and unpublished testimonies and oral histories suggest that, confronted with the growing realization that their recovery required far more than their families or the state would be able to provide, they turned to one another, as they had in the camps, for the aid and support necessary to rebuild their lives. Moreover, their eventual recovery and reintegration stemmed more from their collective efforts than from the actions of a grateful nation.

Specifically, they founded the Association Nationale des Anciennes Déportées et Internées de la Résistance (ADIR) in July 1945 for the dual purpose of providing material and moral support for the survivors and honoring the memory of those who had not returned.5 Composed exclusively of women who had

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4 Wieviorka, 173. With few exceptions, the particular experiences of the several thousand French female political prisoners were excluded from the histories of the period, not unlike the situation of the racial deportees described in Wieviorka's study. Reading the wartime memoirs of de Gaulle, one would never know that French women were among those deported and subsequently repatriated. Writing of the prisoners' return, he called it "a grand national event . . . [one] charged with joy . . . when the nation recovered its two million and a half million sons." Charles de Gaulle, The War Memoirs of Charles de Gaulle, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1960), 278 (emphasis mine). See also Ministère des Prisonniers, Déportés et Réfugiés, Bilan d'un effort (Paris, 1945), the government's official history of the deportation, published shortly before the ministry was dissolved in Nov. 1945, which gave only the slightest indication that any women had been among those detained and deported.

been imprisoned either in the Nazi concentration camps or French prisons because of their wartime resistance, the ADIR became the principal cornerstone on which most female political deportees rebuilt their postwar lives.

The roots of the ADIR can be traced to two wartime groups: the Amicale des prisonnières de la résistance (APR) and a small group organized clandestinely in Ravensbrück, the concentration camp designated primarily for female political prisoners. The APR united a small group of female resisters who had been imprisoned in Paris during the summer of 1942 and had recruited friends and family members to prepare care packages for women they had befriended in prison, especially for those alone and scheduled for deportation. Working with the social service arm of the Comité des Oeuvres des Organisations de Résistance (COSOR), Marie-Hélène Lefaucheux and Yvonne Baratte initially spearheaded the twice-weekly deliveries, which in addition to providing food and clothing to the prisoners presented them with a covert means of communicating with those on the inside. Joining the group after her release from prison in January 1944, Irène (Maryka) Delmas took on the additional responsibility of being a liaison to the families, passing on the latest information about the deportees and prisoners. While her activities were informal and covert, they put her in contact with the leaders of the interior Resistance as well as with members of de Gaulle's exiled government in Algiers. Largely through the efforts of Delmas and other newly released

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6 Ibid.
7 Wife of Pierre Lefaucheux, head of the Paris region of the Forces Françaises de l'Intérieur until his arrest 3 June 1944, and the sister of André Postel-Vinay, a "resister of the first hour" who joined De Gaulle's London cabinet in Oct. 1942 and was named to the Provisional Assembly in Algiers in 1943.
8 Deported to Ravensbrück, where she died shortly before the liberation of the camp in Apr. 1945.
9 Voix et Visages 94 (1964).
female prisoners, the APR organized officially in September 1944, shortly after the Liberation. Of the seven hundred invitations sent out to former resisters, more than three hundred and fifty women attended the first general assembly on 14 October 1944, unanimously approving the by-laws and electing an administrative council headed by Delmas.11 With the intervention of Carl Burckhardt, president of the International Red Cross in Switzerland, Delmas was on hand when the first official group of returning female deportees arrived at the German-Swiss border on 8 April 1945. There she and other members of the APR passed out care packages and told returning women of the services available at the APR’s newly requisitioned headquarters in Paris.

Similarly a group of deportees in Ravensbrück, having foreseen the difficulties many would face in returning to a normal life given their grave physical and mental state, had decided to form an organization to provide aid and support to the survivors, as well as to preserve the friendships forged in the camp.12 Equally important, this group resolved to find a way to acknowledge the wartime contributions and sacrifices that they and their fallen comrades had made. De Gaulle’s niece, Geneviève de Gaulle, spent more than a year in Ravensbrück before she was transferred in late February 1945 to a Red Cross camp in Liebenau on the Swiss-German border.13 Within weeks of rejoining her father, Xavier de Gaulle, the French consul in Switzerland, she began to hold a series of meetings with

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11 Veillon, 161. Assisting Delmas as vice presidents were Mmes. Couette and Schlumberger, secretary-general Coosie Hottinguer, and assistant secretaries Marguerite LeBarazer and Madeline de Lubersac.
12 Voix et Visages 73 (1959). Unfortunately none of the four women who first spoke of a postwar organization survived. Yet the leadership of Emilie Tillion, Yvonne Leroux, Annie de Montford, and Marie Tallet inspired others to pick up the mantle; see the tribute by Anise Postel-Vinay in her 1956 yearly report, Voix et Visages 56 (1956).
13 Also released at the same time as de Gaulle was American deportee Virginia d’Albert-Lake, whose mother in the United States had worked tirelessly for Virginia’s release until her death, just weeks before her daughter was freed.
prominent Swiss citizens to raise awareness of the deportees' plight and the long-term convalescence that many would require. While in Switzerland, De Gaulle and Delmas met and, realizing that they shared a common vision, worked to merge the two groups. Statutes for the new organization, the Association Nationale des Anciennes Déportées et Internées de la Résistance (ADIR), were submitted to the Paris prefecture of police on 22 July 1945, less than three months after the majority of the deportees returned home. A constituent general assembly held on 15 December 1945 approved the merger along with a new administrative council composed of thirteen deportees and five internees.  

Reaching out to the gravely ill, between 1945 and 1949 the ADIR provided its members with the services of seventeen doctors free of charge. Many of the returning women suffered from undiagnosed tuberculosis; consequently the ADIR purchased equipment to screen for the illness. Twice weekly the association's medical personnel offered unlimited consultations and referrals to its members. Most importantly, through its own network of convalescent homes in Switzerland and France, the ADIR arranged for the most severely ill deportees to receive long-term care.  

On average, patients spent four to six months in the homes, but it was not unusual for recovery to take more than a year. The ADIR subsidized the cost of convalescence, including transportation costs to and from deportees' homes. By 1 January 1947 more than five hundred women had spent time in one of the homes, and by the end of the decade more than a thousand had benefited from this initiative. This successful venture reveals that the ADIR understood the pathology of the

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14 Voix et Visages 100 (1965); Voix et Visages 214 (1989); and Veillon, Jeanne Sivadon was elected as the first president, with Elisabeth Dussauze as treasurer and Claire Davinroy the secretary general. The distinction between deportee and internee was dropped in 1958.

15 The rest homes were available largely through the efforts of Geneviève de Gaulle. Convalescence was not limited strictly to members of the ADIR, although they were a priority.

16 Mezzasalma, 55.

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deportation far earlier than governmental and medical authorities. Only in 1953, eight years after their return, did the Ministry for Veterans' Affairs create a special commission to study the pathology of the deportation in order to develop a comprehensive, systematic approach to care for the health needs of those who had been deported.\footnote{"Guide Barème Pour l'Evaluation de l'Invalidité chez les Anciens Internés et Déportés," in the \textit{Journal Officiel de la République Française} 53-1705, 16 May 1953.} For some, aid came too late. Among the approximately forty thousand surviving racial and political deportees, two to three thousand died within a couple of months of their liberation.\footnote{François Abalon, \textit{Les Conséquences neuro-psychiques de la déportation dans les camps de concentration nazis chez les adultes} (Mémoire de D. E. S., Université de Bordeaux, 1987), Section 4.2.1.2; and Charles Richet et al., "Les séquelles des états de misère," \textit{Bulletin de l'Académie nationale de médecine} 132 (1948): 649.} By October 1954, roughly thirty-five percent of the deportees had died as a direct consequence of their deportation.\footnote{Charles Richet et al., "Les séquelles de la misère chez l'adulte," in \textit{Bulletin de l'Académie nationale de médecine} 139 (1955): 247; and \textit{Voix et Visages} 43 (1954).}

The ADIR continued throughout the 1950s to make available to its members the voluntary services of specialized doctors and to place the most urgent patients in hospitals, regardless of their ability to pay. On more than one occasion, hospital administrators called the offices of the association, saying, "We have one of yours here." Always the reply was, "I will grab my hat and be right there."\footnote{\textit{Voix et Visages} 213 (1989).} Without question, the work of the ADIR helped to prevent the repatriation crisis from escalating into a catastrophe. No one had foreseen that sixty percent of all returning female deportees would require some type of immediate medical attention.\footnote{Abalon, Section 3.2.1.4.} Over a quarter of them were critically ill surgical patients or had life threatening infectious diseases, such as typhus and tuberculosis.\footnote{Ibid.} Some suffered from
multiple afflictions. The case of Andrée François is representative of the most critical. Evacuated from Bergen Belsen on 5 June by air, she was unrecognizable when she returned to Paris. The bald thirty-nine year old former teacher, weighing only twenty-six kilos (approximately fifty-seven pounds), had to be asked if she were a man or a woman by a waiting attendant, who had estimated her age to be between seventy-two and eighty. Taken by ambulance to the Salpêtrière hospital, she was treated for frostbite on her feet, gangrene, dysentery, typhus, and various sores, infections, and respiratory ailments that resulted in marked deafness and anemia. Within four months of her return, she had had two operations: the first removed toes from her right foot and the second amputated her left leg to the knee. Still gravely ill, she returned home in December 1945. In early 1946 she contracted tuberculosis and was transferred, thanks to the ADIR, to Montana-sur-Sierre, a sanatorium in the Swiss Alps, where she remained for more than a year. Although she later returned to teaching, François never fully regained her health and was forced to retire in 1956. Until her death in 1973, she remained dedicated to "her comrades of the ADIR," whom she credited with saving her life. Despite failing health and limited mobility, she served for more than a decade as the association's regional delegate from Metz.23

Not all required prolonged hospitalization, but all carried within them the scars of their ordeal. The ADIR became a refuge, a system of moral support that helped the deportees to readjust to their changed circumstances. Geneviève de Gaulle, a founding member of the association as well as its president from 1958 until her death in 2002, reached out to her fellow deportees in the first edition of Voix et Visages, the association's newsletter, reminding them of the "virile, effective, total"

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23 ADIR Papers (Dossier 77), Bibliothèque de documentation internationale contemporaine, University of Paris, Nanterre [hereafter ADIR Papers].
friendship that had sustained them in the camps "as it would again as they undertook their new humane tasks."24

Suzanne Gerald Michel explained to me how her friendship with former deportees helped her to regain her equilibrium after her return.25 Repatriated on 10 May 1945, she learned that, following her own deportation, her husband had been sent to Buchenwald where he died. His occupation as a court bailiff had provided them with living quarters, but after his deportation his position had been filled and their personal goods stolen. As she explained, "We later had an administrative hearing, but everything was gone – my piano and accordions, our cars. The neighbors had taken one, but we never found the other one. Everything had been pillaged." The first six months were "indescribably hard." The joy of seeing her three-year old daughter became a painful memory because the child did not remember her and ran from her to hide under a table when she first returned. "How could she have known, I was still in my camp uniform and I was a bag of bones, with no hair," recalled Madame Michel, still saddened by the memory sixty years later. Her son continued to live with his paternal grandmother, who grieved over the loss of her own son and remained unforgiving towards her daughter-in-law who had survived. With few options, Michel began to rebuild her life. She initially bought a license to sell costume jewelry from a street kiosk and a few months later obtained an apartment in the same building as her godmother. Her jewelry stand was "quite a success" until she ruined all of her merchandise after spraying her apartment with chemicals to kill the pests. When asked how she kept going given the hardships that continued to mount, she replied,

Ah, that is the paradox. But the deportation put things in perspective.
. . . I had trouble communicating with family. People worried about rations and cigarettes, insignificant things. There were four of us from the camps who remained close . . . we drew on our spirit of solidarity that was born in the camps and that deepened on our return.

24 Voix et Visages 1 (1946).
Physically I was very weak, very pale. I had digestive problems from a tape worm that I named Adolph, but the psychological and spiritual problems were worse than my physical problems. . . . For conversation and companionship, I often went to rue Guynemer in the evenings and during the Monday afternoon teas.26

The ADIR's center in Paris, on rue Guynemer, provided short-term lodging, meals, and social services for women who found themselves alone, without work, and without housing after the war.27 Through a friend at an afternoon tea Michel found work after the loss of her jewelry business that trained her in accounting, enabling her to secure a position with Westinghouse Corporation, where she worked until she remarried in 1950.

Members also turned to the ADIR for help in dealing with all of the government ministries charged with administering their benefits. Not only did *Voix et Visages* publish the relevant laws and polices concerning the rights and benefits accorded to former resisters, but the ADIR assisted its members in preparing their individual dossiers and intervened directly on their behalf on multiple occasions. The ADIR was one of sixty resistance associations sponsored by the Office National des Anciens Combattants (ONAC), the office of veterans' affairs and the agency responsible for issuing cards attesting to an individual's participation in the Resistance (*cartes de résistance*). As the only association that advocated exclusively for the rights of female deportees and internees, the ADIR received a permanent seat on the board of the ONAC in 1948.28 Between 1950 and 1953, the organization presented slightly less than three thousand dossiers to the ONAC, while averaging for the remainder of the decade over a thousand per year. Gabrielle Ferrières, the secretary-general of the ADIR from 1949 to 1955, worked tirelessly to

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26 Ibid.
27 ADIR Papers, 797/1/1/3.
gain recognition for the association's members. As Anise Postel-Vinay's remarks to the membership at their 1957 general assembly demonstrated, their task was immense and time consuming, and a case was seldom resolved on its first appeal:

This year we have presented 1190 dossiers, 113 more than last year. . . little by little without doubt the word is spreading that the ADIR is efficient and that nothing leaves our offices without our best efforts. . . . Still on the question of the cards, the disability pensions, the files of need . . . which take up most of our time, we have completed for 1956, 373 interventions on behalf of 194 comrades . . . one of them is the thirteenth intervention and the pension is still not in hand. Madame Engoumé has taken multiple administrative and judicial measures . . . appealing before the administrative and pension tribunals, the council of state even. She appeared also before the Ministry of Finance in order to suppress the marital authorization that allowed husbands, scandalously, to claim rights to our benefits.29

From the beginning the ADIR saw itself as a small organization with a membership limited to women who willingly and voluntarily sacrificed for their country, comparable to male veterans' associations. It sought to represent only those authentic women resisters who had endured the additional hardships of imprisonment, particularly in the concentration camps. Membership in the ADIR required the written sponsorship of two existing members and the final approval of a membership committee designated by the national office. In choosing a narrow focus, the ADIR attained a total membership of less than five thousand, made up of approximately ninety percent former deportees and ten percent internees.30 But by focusing its aims and ensuring the integrity of its membership, the ADIR was able

30 Veillon, 167. The ADIR differed considerably from the Union des femmes françaises (UFF), the only other strictly female wartime resistance organization, created in 1944 by the Front National. After the war, the UFF, as an arm of the French Communist Party, increased its membership by broadening its focus to include all aspects of women's civil and political rights, reaching a high-water mark of over 600,000 members in 1946.
to obtain the medical and social services for its members that enabled them to rebuild their lives. At the same time, the ADIR established itself as the sole recognized representative of their particular interests. The ADIR quickly evolved into an effective pressure group, capable of influencing not only public opinion but also state policies that affected its membership.

At a time when women in France had only just received the right to vote and still remained legally under the guardianship of their husbands and fathers, the women of the ADIR chose to organize themselves on the basis of gender, as formerly imprisoned women resisters, independent of established political parties and direct institutional affiliation. This choice reflected their awareness of their unique circumstances and their belief that their wartime activism had been little understood or accepted. Their conviction that no one would speak for them if they did not do so for themselves determined the "innovative character" of the ADIR from its inception. 31

The ADIR's activism also reveals the extent to which their intense wartime experiences transformed these women and why, after the war, many of them continued to operate outside of the traditional roles assumed by French women. The women of the ADIR, however, did not view themselves as agents of change or as political actors; rather, they identified themselves personally and collectively as "patriots" – the wives, mothers, and daughters of France who had voluntarily taken the same risks as men in defense of their country, had suffered the same punishments, and now had united to care for one another and obtain the rights and recognition that they legitimately had earned. This mission required pragmatic action and became the life's work for a number of them, for example Renée Moreau, who understood the significance of her continued activism:

[The] return showed us how we had been uprooted. It was necessary for us to readapt to life in stages. We stayed, for several years, between the two worlds that had confronted us. It was necessary to rethink totally, to rediscover completely, to find, in a sense, a new

31 Mezzasalme, 50.
life. . . . On returning, I learned that I could not stay inactive. So many of my comrades had returned home ill, and I also thought of our widows in need of getting their equal rights, materially as well as morally. That is why, since 1945 and until my last breath, I will speak out through the [associations], where I hold important local and departmental responsibilities.\footnote{Individual dossier, Files of Germaine Tillion.}

For the majority of the female political deportees, the ADIR became the mouthpiece by which they raised their collective voices.