



**COLLEGE
COMMONS**

JAMES MCAULEY: JEWISH ART COLLECTORS AND THE FALL OF FRANCE

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons podcast, and our Acclaimed Author series, brought to you by HUC Connect, together with the Jewish Book Council. We'll meet authors recognized by the National Jewish Book Awards and discuss their celebrated books. My name is Joshua Holo, Dean of HUC's Skirball Campus in Los Angeles, and your host.

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JH: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons podcast, where we're gonna enjoy a conversation with James McAuley. James McAuley is a global opinions contributing columnist and former Paris correspondent for the Washington Post. He holds a PhD in French History from the University of Oxford, where he was also a martial scholar. "The House of Fragile Things: Jewish Art Collectors and the Fall of France" came out from Yale University Press in 2021 and won the National Jewish Book Award. In The House of Fragile Things, McAuley illustrates how France betrayed the very Jews most invested in her promise of equality and democracy. Welcome, James McAuley to the College Commons podcast, and thank you for joining us.

James McAuley: Thanks so much Josh, for having me. It's great to be here with you today.

JH: The House of Fragile Things described a Jewish elite that had a complicated relationship with its own Jewishness, complexity and variety that pre-dated French persecution during the Holocaust, who were these elite French Jews and how did they vary in their Jewish self-understanding?

JM: That's a great question, and I'm glad that you asked that. Essentially, this is a very rarified milieu. Social elites, as you say, often the families that were very involved in what in French is called the era of the Old Bank, the debut of finance capitalism in the late 19th century. So a lot of the families were the founders of banks, like what is today called Paribas and others, the Rothschild reputation speaks for itself. But this is the very Plutocratic caste we are talking about. And as such, they had a diversity of Jewish identities. This was a world that, to borrow from the British historian, Hyam Berman, was a cousin-hood in the sense that so many of these families

married each other, and so it really was a sort of larger social network in which everyone was related. But they weren't all uniform at all when it came to the way that they related to Judaism and Jewishness, what they did have in common was a commitment to France. So in addition to their roles in whatever financial institutions they may have occupied, many of them were governors of major cultural institutions like the Louvre museum or even members of the French Parliament, as in the case of the Reinach family.

JM: And with that came a vastly different array of perspectives on how to relate to Judaism and Jewishness. And so you had some that were very devout, others that even converted for marriage or other reasons. And one of my main characters, Béatrice de Camondo, seems to have been a zealous convert to Catholicism. Which is quite interesting because it shows that, as is so often the case, no two people have the same relationship to any identity, and that was absolutely the way that this cast of characters experienced Jewishness. And I think in some ways, I relate to that myself as somebody who is Jewish, but is from a kind of intermarried family, and so it's a fascinating question. But at the end of the day, what is especially heartbreaking is that it really didn't matter how any of these people considered themselves or how they understood their own Judaism, or their own interest in Jewish topics or not. Because of course, the Nazis arrived in France and boxed them into this identity category they had no control over, and that was the basis of their liquidation.

JH: One dimension of French anti-Semitic persecution during the Holocaust is the degree to which the French authorities did or did not distinguish among those Jews whom they thought of as foreigners versus those whom they thought of as French. How did that distinction play out for our Jewish protagonists as well as their French persecutors?

JM: That's a really complicated and thorny historical question, it is true that of the 76,000 Jews roughly deported from France to the Nazi death camps, the vast majority were foreign born. However, it is also, I don't think at all accurate to say that authorities on the whole protected French Jews in any significant way. In the summer of 1940 when France fell in a matter of days, stunning even the most cynical observers, the Vichy Mandarins, the Vichy being the collaborationist government that controlled the so-called free zone in the southern half of the country during the war, the Nazis controlled the upper part. Many of them at the beginning thought that there would or even should be distinctions made for established Jewish families, such as the ones I write about in my book. And Pétain himself, Philippe Pétain being the head of the Vichy government, decorated World War One hero, he personally intervened to save, I would point out, only three French Jews, the Charles Luba family.

JM: And there was a little bit of confusion on that at the beginning, but at the end of the day, Vichy, independent of Nazi pressure, pursued its own slew of anti-Jewish legislation and restrictions, the so-called Statut des Juifs. And I think for this group of people that I was writing about, it was kind of impossible to conceive that after so much that they had done for France, that their sons fighting for it in World War I and dying in many cases, they all, in some way or another, left a major bequest or art collection to the state as a gesture of gratitude for the

country that had, before any other in Western Europe, emancipated its Jewish population. They'd served in the parliament, they'd done so much for this country and had really done quite a lot, I would say, to shape its cultural patrimony. They just couldn't believe that all of it was worth nothing at the end. And I think it's easy, in hindsight, to say, "Well, they couldn't see the writing on the wall." But the thing is, nobody ever can. And you have to ask yourself how you would respond if the same was happening to you in real-time. It's unthinkable in a civilized country like France, even in the midst of Nazi menace, because of course, they didn't have the full perspective that we have, looking back on it, to consider.

JM: And so there really was, I think, a belief that they would be spared or that somehow their contributions would be appreciated. And one of the most heartbreaking letters that I found in the course of researching the book is... So I mentioned in an earlier answer, Béatrice de Camondo, who was kind of the red thread that runs through the book. But her husband was from the Reinach family of, essentially, the equivalent of the James family in American history, this amazingly accomplished family of letters, politicians, intellectuals, journalists, you name it, they did everything. And her husband was from this family, both the Camondo side and the Reinach side have left major bequests to the state in the form of private collections in mansions that the public could visit and that, by the way, had opened before the war to widespread critical acclaim. And he writes a letter to the Vichy authorities, essentially aghast that none of it counted. And the letter is particularly heartbreaking because it's a sort of itemized list of everything that they had done for France. And it was meant to make a case that, surely, this will count for something. And we know how the story ends, but he didn't, at that time at least.

JM: And it's a really thorny historical issue, even to this day, of course. Because we've just come out of a presidential election in which the question of whether Vichy saved French Jews was a campaign talking point from Éric Zemmour, a fascinating character, if ever there were one. So it's a lingering point of contention. But I don't think that they did much to help the types of the characters that I write about in the book.

JH: Let's follow up on Léon Reinach who is one of the unlikely heroes, in a way. As you describe, he not only writes this letter, but he somewhat courageously invokes the very ideals of French republicanism and humanism to the very same Vichy French authorities that are overrunning those values. Tell us a bit about the complexities of Léon.

JM: Léon Reinach, we know is the son of Théodore Reinach, who's one of the big characters in my book and a personal hero of mine. His father was hugely prolific and important. He wrote more books than I can count. He was a member of the French Parliament, a kind of champion of the French Jewish community during the time of the Dreyfus affair. Léon was a composer and sort of an aesthete. And some of the accounts that survived suggest that he was quite arrogant. He was married off to Béatrice de Camondo from a very wealthy Jewish family that was a sort of neighbor of the Reinach's. And they had a very unhappy marriage. I think, for one reason or another, the relationship with Béatrice doesn't work. One of the reasons is that at some point, Béatrice embraces Catholicism and Léon starts having affairs. With whom, we don't know. But

that is what is reported in the divorce agreement. And that's all we can sort of establish with precision. But Léon, I think, is a captivating character, because he was very courageous when it counted. And even though he was separated from his sort of estranged wife at that time, he really went to bat and fought for all of her stolen property and his family's stolen property in a way that actually made him vulnerable to more attention from the Nazi and Vichy authorities than he would otherwise have had.

JM: And he did so, as you mentioned, in the language of the values that his whole family and their world had defended and upheld and exemplified for decades and even generations. And in talking about the project with fellow historians or readers, some of them would sort of scoff and say, "Oh, these people are foolish." But in my mind, the attachment of people like Léon to the values that they believed in, and when I say values, I mean this sort of universalist promise of liberty, equality and fraternity. These enlightenment era ideals that, at least in theory, governed the nature of the French republic then and now, it is anything but foolish for me. Because it shows a remarkable amount of bravery in the midst of duress that he and many others would still abide by these convictions, and that nothing could really shake them, not even the unthinkable.

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JH: The College Commons Podcast is proud to be part of HUC Connect, the Hebrew Union College's online platform for continuing education. HUC Connect features four programs, webinars, live conversations with social and cultural influencers on topics of civil society, arts and culture, religion, and redefining allyship. Community Connect, ready-made lesson plans for synagogue and community learning. The Masterclass, live sessions of Judaica with HUC faculty exclusively for our alumni. Enroll soon because seats are limited. And of course, the College Commons podcast, in depth conversations with Judaism's leading thinkers. For more information about HUC Connect, and all it has to offer, visit huc.edu/huc-connect. And now back to our program. The beginning of your book introduces us to Béatrice de Camondo, whom you've mentioned already. You write not just as an introduction to her, but very movingly of her. And even more so, you write of the historians intimacy with their subjects. On getting to know Béatrice you write the following, "She mattered, I thought, because she was a Jewish victim of the Holocaust who had believed in the mythology of a national enterprise that ultimately saw her as expendable. All of that I still believe. And yet, nothing quite prepares you for the moment when you finally hear your elusive subject speak for herself."

JH: What is it meant for you, as a person and as an historian, to inhabit this world of people so precipitously and unceremoniously not only disenfranchised and robbed but murdered?

JM: It was a profoundly moving experience, more or less from the beginning. And I think just to speak a little bit about Béatrice de Camondo, and then I'll expand. But the experience of writing about this person was so illuminating for me because I had my initial read on her, as you always do when you're writing on someone in the past. You have this story that you have created to

explain why they matter and what the relevance of their story is, and why we should care about it. And everything sort of proceeds from there, and oftentimes, it holds whatever story you've chosen or selected. But in this case it was an exercise in understanding the limitations of that practice. And what I mean by that is, when you do this kind of history, which is fundamentally micro historical, i.e. Looking at particular individuals who are not necessarily Charles de Gaulle, or even Philippe Pétain, people with huge amounts of archives, etcetera. You really have to find absolutely every archival trace you can and weigh each document heavily.

JM: And in the case of Béatrice de Camondo, I thought I had absolutely everything there is to have, until I realized there was more. And this was an amazingly serendipitous experience that I had where I came across an old man who lives in the Paris suburb of Neuilly. And I went out to meet him one day, and he told me that his mother had been a childhood friend of Béatrice and something that is along the lines of having the neighboring estate to the Camondo house far in the countryside where they both rode horses as young girls, and so I was intrigued. But I didn't really expect much more, except perhaps a sort of stray anecdote. But when I went into the living room, he opened the slant top desk that he had, and he pulled out two letters, one written in 1917 when her brother Nissim had died fighting for France in the First World War, this was a letter that she had written to this man's mother. But the second one took my breath away, and it was a letter that Béatrice had written in September 1942, I believe September the 5th, which would be exactly three months to the day of her arrest by the Nazis.

JM: And it's just incredible to see something like that because it's just one letter, there probably were many others, but this is ultimately the only one that I could find and the only one that survived, and it reveals multiple things. One, she was not particularly concerned about the Nazis, she was clearly traveling all over the north of France to continue her horseback riding. She didn't feel particularly in jeopardy. But the other was so illuminating in terms of her character and what was going through her mind because it showed also that she was a zealous convert, beyond any reasonable doubt. Now, of course, I knew that Béatrice, like so many other Jews in the peak of the Nazi occupation and menace, had converted as a sort of doomed insurance policy, that was not particularly original or new. And so I didn't think much of it. I thought, "Okay, she probably just did this as a means of trying to survive." And I moved on. I never considered that she actually believed it.

JM: But in the letter written to her friend, who, by the way, also was from a similarly secular Jewish background, and I believe also had at some point for marriage converted. Béatrice rambles on and on and on about how she feels so unworthy of God and the Virgin Mary and that the two of them will somehow save her. She doesn't feel that she deserves all the support that they have given her over the years, which means that it wasn't just a war time conversion. And she also suggests that she's been trying to push her children to follow her into the church, which of course may have been an issue for Léon Reinach, understandably. But all of that is just to say that it's a reminder of what I think should remain the most important thing about just other people, but especially in the writing of history, which is how inscrutable they always are. And you know, you think you know someone because of who and what they were, but you actually have

no idea what was going on in their emotional inner life. And with Béatrice, what I hoped to do was restore some of the complexity of this woman and this person who, regardless of the way she saw herself, was still arrested and murdered by the Nazis.

JH: Keeping Béatrice and others in mind, a key cross-current in your book is a feminist perspective, in which you highlight women's sensibilities and the silencing of their experience in various ways. Can you share with us another of the most important examples that illustrate this concern, both as an historian and for the women who lived then?

JM: The way that I really try to get into that was the question of portraiture. Collecting was predominantly a male pursuit in this era, and so a lot of the collectors, who were these essentially finance guys, had portraits commissioned of their daughters and their wives that they displayed like ornaments. But the art object became a kind of signifier for what the woman in the canvas was supposed to be, it was a sort of platonic ideal of what the social norms of the time expected of the sitter. And what I try to show in the book is that so many of the women depicted in these canvases in this Jewish world were desperate to escape, and some of them did. So a good example of that would be Irène Cahen D'Anvers, who was Béatrice's mother, the wife of Moïse de Camondo for a time. So the Cahen D'Anvers were the family that founded the Paribas bank, very wealthy, very Parisian, very culturally prominent at that time. And she had her whole life planned for her, and she was meant to become a kind of society hostess, so to speak. And Irène clearly didn't want that, and she ran off from her marriage with Moïse de Camondo, she converted to Catholicism, as her own daughter later would do, although in Irène's case it seems to have been less a matter of belief, and she married an Italian count who was a stable master in Paris and had a whole new life with him and a new daughter and kind of left everything about this rarified Jewish world behind.

JM: And the portrait that survives, it's a world-famous portrait, it appears in the Godard film *Breathless*, it's a testament both to the sensibilities of her parents and also the world that she found so oppressive, as did so many of the other women in this milieu. Another woman that I write about a lot in the book is Béatrice de Rothschild, who was one of the few women at the time who collected herself. And her whole collection seems to be a bit of a subversion of the ways in which one was supposed to collect if one was a wealthy bourgeois of the time. So she plays with conventions and mocks the whole thing a little bit, I found that very interesting. But I think when Jewish history is written, sometimes we assume a sort of homogenous perspective on the people we're talking about. And it is true that they lived in a time of amazingly virulent anti-Semitism that they all experienced men and women alike, but there was also the interior of their world and their lives. And the men and the women had vastly different experiences of that time, and it's important to sort of tease those out as best we can. So that was one project that I tried, however incompletely, in the book.

JH: I want to shift gears back to a previous mention of yours about the recent election in France and the invocation of this history with respect to saving or not saving Jews during the Holocaust. Can you elaborate a bit on that episode in recent months?

JM: I would say for decades the question of historical Revisionism and Holocaust denial in particular have been central in French public debate, and this is something that for years as Paris correspondent for the Post, that I had to follow. There's the Le Pen dynasty founded by Jean Marie Le Pen, who has relished saying on any number of occasions that, for instance the Nazi gas chambers were a, "detail in the history of World War II." There was his daughter, Marine Le Pen, who did better than she ever has in this year's contest and who has said things like that the infamous roundup of Parisian Jews in July 1942 was not France, even though of course it was French police and not Nazis that did that. And then coupled with that, this time we had the entree of a very bizarre character that I mention, Éric Zemmour, who is arguably the most vocal Revisionist but who also himself is Jewish and who comes from an Algerian Jewish family although he was born in Paris. And he has sort of insisted, for reasons that remain unclear, on provoking and scandalizing and offending by saying things like, Philippe Pétain, the head of the Vichy government, was actually out to save French Jews, that Philippe Pétain was a responsible wartime custodian, that we don't actually know whether Alfred Dreyfus was innocent, hugely offensive false statements and lies.

JM: And where this comes from is an open question, but it adds a dangerous sense of legitimacy because Zemmour himself is Jewish and so it's hard to dismiss on the topic as the Le Pen's have been dismissed for decades and that's really concerning. Obviously, Macron won, but that whole side of the coin remains, and it's not going away any time soon.

JH: Indeed, it triggers my next question to you, which I hope is fair game, because your book looks to the Holocaust as one of its bookends. I'd like to ask you about another article of yours, namely a 2014 piece in the New Republic about the POLIN Museum in Warsaw. The article is titled, "Jewish History is not just about the Holocaust. Finally, a museum gets that." In the article you cite Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, the POLIN Museum's curator, who explains, "One of our main objectives is to tell this story in a way that doesn't give the sense that the Holocaust was inevitable. After all, the last thing Poland needs is a holocaust museum. The whole country is a holocaust museum." Without a doubt, the POLIN Museum's documentation and celebration of a millennium of Jewish history is a great achievement, I've been there and I agree. But the article is eight-years-old, so do you still feel that amidst persistent polish apologia for the Holocaust and rising right-wing authoritarianism in Middle Europe, and as you just said, threads of that in Western Europe, can we afford to stop hitting the same key of Holocaust memory even though it sometimes feels tired?

JM: That's an excellent question and I'm very glad you asked that. Personally, I think that you're absolutely right, that especially in these times, we have to preserve the memory that turns out to be far more fragile than I think any of us realize. And I say this as somebody who was born in 1989 and who grew up in the time, in the US, of course, where the kinds of revisionism that we're seeing, even at home, were absolutely unthinkable in the 1990s and even early 2000s, so I am 100% in agreement that we have to bolster that memory however we can. At the same time, I think that it is crucial that we accept and insist on a view of Jewish history that does not

end with the Holocaust or consider the Holocaust as its center, and I feel very strongly about that. And in here, I'm inspired by the likes of the great historian at Columbia University, Salo Baron, who basically brought Jewish studies to the American University and who lost most of his own family in the Holocaust in Galicia, but who insisted that what mattered about Jewish history was its longevity, its vastness and its immensity.

JM: And I sort of see these two things as complementary to each other, so one way to bolster the memory that is today, as you say, in jeopardy so many places, is to show that Jewish history is this vast and long and beautiful, most of all, tableau, it's not just a teleology of tragedy, it is an amazing story and an amazing civilization that has so much to be proud of and so much inspiration in it, at least I find that, and I think we would do well to remember that as well.

JH: I couldn't agree more. And in fact, during my graduate studies in medieval Jewish history, during which by the way, I had cause, both to read, cite and appreciate the Théodore Reinach's work. I also had to find light in some pretty dark chapters of history. In your research, where did you find cause for optimism, and where did you see the light? Perhaps unexpectedly.

JM: It's a really good question too. For me, the most, I guess, beautiful chapter of the story is that of the Reinach family and their experience. Théodore Reinach, in particular, created essentially this incredible hybrid vision for Franco-Judaism. And of course, there's a particular literature attached to Franco-Judaism as opposed to other kind of national Judaisms, because frenchness has always been so invested in the question of identity and specifically, particularity versus universality, and so Judaism and Jewishness present interesting challenges to the French model and that was a big question in the days of the late 19th century, and indeed today. And Théodore Reinach along with his brothers, Joseph and Salomon, really came up with this beautiful sort of hybrid sense of things in which the only way to access the universal is through the particular, because it's the particular that turns out to be the most universal thing of all. We all have our unique perspectives, our families, our cultures, our religions, our origins, whatever those may be, that is what makes us human, and it's through embracing those for a shared common good, living together, that we access anything that resembles universality and I found that really inspiring.

JM: And also I discovered in the research of the book, which I did not know before, that Théodore Reinach, who was also one of the great acolytes of liberal Judaism in France, was actually the founder of the synagogue that I kind of began attending shortly after moving to Paris, so it kind of all came full circle in that sense.

JH: Well, it's a great and moving story and beautifully written, and thank you, James McAuley, for joining us in discussing the House Of Fragile Things. It was a real pleasure to talk to you.

JM: No. I thank you so much for having me, I really appreciate it.

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