



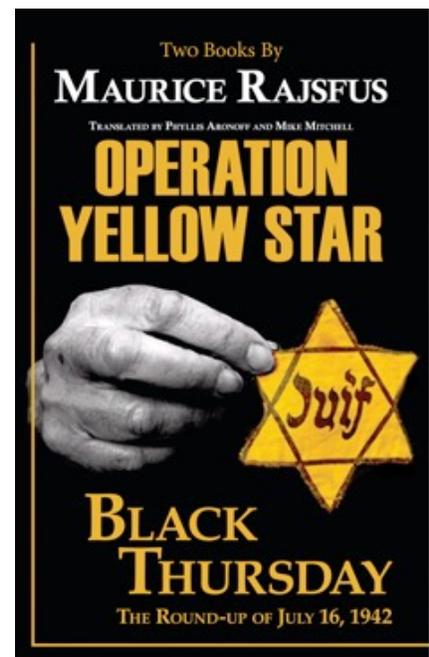
READING GROUP GUIDE

Operation Yellow Star and Black Thursday: The Roundup of July 16, 1942
Two books by Maurice Rajsfus
Translated by Phyllis Aronoff and Mike Mitchell

Introduction

French activist and former investigative journalist Maurice Rajsfus shares his research and personal recollections in order to shed new light on France's role in the Holocaust. *Operation Yellow Star* is a play-by-play retelling of the implementation of the yellow star in France that presents a clear narrative of the bureaucracy and mechanisms of the German occupying forces, as well as the inner workings of the "law and order" society. The book centers its cross-examination on Paris itself – the attitudes of its residents, whether resistant or collaborative or merely indifferent – and the origin of the yellow star is explained, tracing back to the *rouelles* and pointed hats Jews were obligated to wear under different regimes.

Black Thursday is the author's own account of being arrested along with his family when he was fourteen years old. The policeman who came brusquely to his family's small apartment door was none other than a neighbor, a stinging reality that the author uses to catapult his investigation into the crime forty years after the fact. As one of the rare survivors of the raid, seeking answers brings the author to uncomfortable conclusions and ultimately to understand himself as one of France's "lost children" and "a survivor of the absurd."



An essential document to understand and above all to not forget. To this day there are still no pictures of the days of horror at the Vélodrome d'Hiver.

– Clara Magazine
(French feminist publication)



REVIEWS

"Through his sobering, exhaustive research Rajsfus chronicles the arrests, harassment, and deportations of French Jews. [...] Rajsfus' eyewitness, unblinking account of the events in Vichy France is journalistic, yet a passionately written *j'accuse* against the French collaborators and those who want to erase the devastating atrocities he witnessed."

– New York Journal of Books

"Maurice Rajsfus has devoted his life to denouncing and combating racism, fascism, intolerance, and police brutality, while putting in his texts a good dose of caustic irony."

– Jakilea, Basque Human Rights Defense League

"An unsparing indictment of Paris police during the Nazi occupation. [...] The author's memory of July 16 is harrowing. [...] Besides commemorating his family's murder, Rajsfus raises awareness about how 'the enemies of human rights are once more gaining ground,' spouting xenophobia that is easily transferable to any minority group. A heartfelt, timely plea to remember past atrocities."

– Kirkus Reviews

"If [Rajsfus] still wishes to recall how scrupulously – and even with zeal – the French police applied Nazi orders, he also wants to warn us against certain xenophobic or discriminatory speech still heard recently that could lead to behavior of that bygone age."

– Ekaitza – weekly newspaper, Bayonne, France

"Without making improper comparisons, the roundup of the Vél d'Hiv is a very current topic. Maurice Rajsfus' narrative can help us to grasp both the logic and the implications of a policy of exclusion of populations and communities who, because of their ethnic, national or religious origin, are not protected by the State of which they are a part."

– Michel Warschawski, author of *On the Border*



READING GROUP QUESTIONS

1. On the first pages of *Operation Yellow Star*, the author writes a “Notice” to the readers. He proposes that the founding act that would require the Jews to wear the yellow star was not the Nazi 8th ordinance, but was written into the very terms of France’s capitulation to the occupiers. Why is this distinction important for him to state at the outset? Discuss the argument he is making and how this point supports his argument.
2. The Nazi 8th ordinance required that Jews in occupied France wear the yellow star. What were some of the challenges the Gestapo faced in compelling Jewish citizens of France to wear the yellow star? Who helped them? What other people in France facilitated the production and distribution of the stars?
3. What are the origins of the yellow star as an official mark, and why were Jews frequently marked throughout the centuries they have lived in Europe?
4. The role of the Paris police under Nazi occupation was specifically to keep the peace. What did this mean in the early stages of the occupation, in 1940? How did it evolve by 1944? And what happened to the police upon Liberation? How were they treated afterward?
5. Why do you think the author gives so many accounts of arrested students? What points does he make about how average people in France resisted or could have resisted some of the orders? What were the risks of resistance?
6. How were people treated differently and viewed differently once they were wearing the star? Discuss using the author’s own experience he relates in *Black Thursday* in combination with the newspaper accounts in *Operation Yellow Star*. How was that experience different for children than adults?



8. How does the author's personal account of his family's arrest in *Black Thursday* reinforce and elaborate on the history documented in *Operation Yellow Star*? Is there anything that shocked or surprised you about the way the raid was conducted or who was involved?

9. How were the author and his family treated by the police who came to arrest them, and how did this affect the Rajsfus family? How did it change the author's perception of his neighbors and of the people of France?

10. Most of the 4,000 children arrested during the Vél d'Hiv Raid were killed; only a handful survived. How does the author represent the other Jewish children in his story and what happened to them? How does he think about himself and other survivors who were children at that time?

11. The author spends much of *Black Thursday* describing his search for reasons as to how and why the tragedy of the raid, arrests and deportations occurred. Discuss his methods, who he talks to, the documents he looks for, and what the results of his search turn out to be.

12. Discuss the emotional turns in the text: sadness, anger, nostalgia, disgust, distress, betrayal, grief and resolve are all present at different times, and in sometimes unexpected places. What triggers cause the author to feel these different emotions?

13. How is Maurice Rajsfus' investigative book *Operation Yellow Star* also a form of witness testimony? Why did he write these books? How does the author connect his own experience to racism and injustice that still happens today? What do you think he hoped to achieve by going into the archives to draw out unknown facts? By delving into his own painful memories?

14. Does the author find answers to his questions? With whom, and how?



15. Is there an argument for the collective immunity of the police, the bus drivers, and anyone else who participated in the arrests and deportations? Is there an argument for their collective guilt? And how do you think society should address these ideas in general after wars and conflicts, in deciding who is punished and for what crimes?

16. The author writes, "A mayor often reflects his city. Like most of his citizens that I had met in the course of my research, it had taken the mayor of Vincennes more than forty years to find out what had happened beneath his windows at the dawn of one summer day." What are the author's opinions of people who choose to remain ignorant or uninformed when violence and injustices occur?

17. How does the author feel about his hometown of Vincennes, and why, after all these years, does it help him to go back there?

18. Is there anything that surprised you about the author after reading filmmaker Justine Malle's interview with him in the appendix? For example, about how the course his life took after his arrest? After the war? After he became politically active?



Maurice Rajsfus (b. 1928) is an activist and former investigative journalist for *Le Monde*. He is the author of thirty books, including many examining the Vichy regime and its legacy in French police culture. He has also written about Drancy concentration camp and Israel–Palestine, as well as co-authored several illustrated books about history. In 1990, Rajsfus and several friends founded “Ras l’Front,” an anti-Le Pen association of far-left-wing organizations extremely active in the 1990s against the rise of nationalist parties in France and fascist ideas. They worked together and promoted leftist causes through a monthly publication as well as actions. He served as chairman from 1991–1999. From 1994–2012 Rajsfus created and circulated “Que fait la police,” a “Cop Watch” bulletin with press clippings detailing human rights abuses by French police. His books about the Vél d’Hiv raid and his experiences during WWII have been brought together to form the basis of a YA comic (Tartamudo editions) as well as a play written and directed by Philippe Ogouz, which was then adapted for film in 2010, *Souvenirs d’un vieil enfant: La rafle du Vel’ d’Hiv* (Memories of an Old Child: The Roundup of the Vel’ d’Hiv), directed by Alain Guesnier. Maurice Rajsfus lives in Paris with his wife, and has two sons as well as several grandchildren and great-grandchildren.



Maurice Rajsfus, 2016, Paris



Phyllis Aronoff (b. 1945) has won the Jewish Literary Award for translation and the translation prize from the Quebec Writers' Federation. She was president of the Literary Translators' Association of Canada and from 2007-2015 represented translators on the Public Lending Right Commission of Canada.

Mike Mitchell (b. 1941) is an award-winning translator of French and German who has been active as a translator for over thirty years. He is the recipient of the Schlegel-Tieck Prize for translations of German works published in Britain, has won the British Comparative Literature Association translation competition three times, and has been shortlisted for many awards including the French-American Translation Prize, the Weidenfeld prize, the Aristeion prize, the Kurt Wolff prize, and the Crime Writers' Association Gold Dagger. In 2012 the Austrian Ministry of Education, Art and Culture awarded him a lifetime achievement award as a translator of literary works. He lives in Scotland.

Interviewer **Justine Malle** (b. 1974) is a filmmaker based in Paris, whose best-known movie *Junesse* features a daughter dealing with her famous filmmaker father's terminal illness. Malle's own father, Louis Malle, was the director of the poignant and ground-breaking film *Au revoir Les enfants* (1987), based on events he witnessed in 1944 in occupied France, among many other well-loved films.



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