

Pursuing a project on the Jews of Amiens and the Department of the Somme

By [DAVID ROSENBERG](#)

November 5, 2015, 4:10 pm

My wife pointed out that at the very end of our trips to France, which were partly vacation, partly research trips for me, I always contrived to find some historical sources, which absolutely required us to return the following year. For example, in 2013 when I was researching the emigration of Amiens Protestants to Leiden in Holland in the 17th century, we traveled to that Dutch city for several days, but only long enough for me establish how much more there was in the archives that cried out for another, longer visit.

A few years ago, when my focus shifted to the subject of the fate of the Jews of the Somme region during the Shoah, this quasi-subterfuge continued. My wife had returned to Pittsburgh the first week in August to prepare for the new school year, but I, a retiree, was permitted to stay on for several more weeks in France to explore, in the not disagreeable circumstances of an American in France, what more the archives might yield for my subject.

For the first week I was there they didn't yield much. I dawdled a bit in the public library, where I perused the local newspapers (*Progrès de la Somme*, *Journal d'Amiens*) for the period of the Occupation, duly noting their pro-German slant. The departmental archives were closed from Aug. 1 until after Quinze (Aug. 15), a French national holiday. It was, however, exactly during this hiatus that the metaphorical lightning struck.

I don't know what directed me, sitting at my computer in my apartment in Amiens, toward a YouTube of a panel discussion, which had been held at the Museum of Jewish Art and History in Paris. One of the panelists, Caroline Piketty, was describing a project undertaken by the French National Archives, to film the records of the Office for Economic Aryanization, a branch of the Vichy government that was charged with enforcing the removal of all Jewish influence from the economic life of France. I already knew something about this sad process from documents I had seen in the departmental and municipal archives in Amiens, but Piketty described her source, "Series AJ 38," in a way that hinted at a trove of material far surpassing anything I had previously seen.

When the National Archives reopened after Aug. 15, I commuted into Paris and spent three amazing days confirming Piketty's observations. Not only was there an abundance of information on each of the owners and property that were transferred into "Aryan" hands, there were a number of other documents I had not found anywhere else. The most startling were letters of individual Jews addressed to the French government authorities and describing generally the difficulties into which they had fallen, as the heavy hand of anti-Jewish laws was progressively put in place. Here, too, dishearteningly, were images of registers which Jewish heads of households were obliged to sign attesting that they had received their allotment of Yellow Stars for themselves and their families; here was an anonymous denunciation of a Jewish country doctor who the writer thought should have been compelled to cease his practice; here was a report filed by two French policemen concerning their arrest of a foreign-born Jew whom they had subsequently accompanied by train to the camp for the Jews at Drancy, where he was later shipped to Auschwitz. Surprises (at least for me) abounded as the images of the microfilmed documents unfolded: here were the names and backgrounds of the people who acquired Jewish-owned properties; here, in fact, were the names of all of the bidders. No one could claim ignorance – the documents showed that the properties were advertised in the local newspapers "Israelite building for sale," and the buyers had to submit elaborate documentation and family trees to prove that no trace of Jewish blood coursed through their veins.

I learned something else from this brief exposure to "Series AJ 38." I learned that after the big roundup in Paris (perhaps familiar to readers through the book and movie "Sarah's Key") there had been a roundup, albeit much smaller in the region I was studying, in July 18-19, 1942. The documents showed this to have been coordinated carefully to single out foreign-born, not French Jews, and executed in a way so as not "to alarm the Jews remaining."

Of course, in January 1944, it was the turn in the Somme region of French and naturalized French Jews to be arrested, sent to Drancy and deported to Auschwitz.

Back home in Pittsburgh at the end of August, I felt I could hardly wait for a return trip, but of course, among other things, there was the expense to consider. Olivier de Solan, director of the Departmental Archives in Amiens, suggested I look into the cost of reproducing the microfilm and having it sent to me. I did so, and after an interval of several months, a box of 20 microfilm reels arrived on my doorstep in Mt. Lebanon. This shipment and the availability of a microfilm reader and printer in the Mt. Lebanon library are enabling me to expand my research and are opening up new avenues to make my discoveries better known, especially on the ground in France.

>> This article follows previous reporting in The Chronicle by David Rosenberg (“Memorializing in Amiens” May 3, 2012) and by Senior Staff Writer Toby Tabachnick, (“Rosenberg to Speak at TE on Research work in Amiens,” Aug. 16, 2013).