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# Rita Thalmann (1926-2013), Pioneer of Women's History

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- 1 Born in Nuremberg to a German-Jewish father and a Swiss-Jewish mother, Rita Thalmann fled the Nazi regime with her family in 1933, first taking refuge in Switzerland and then in France. After losing both her father (denounced and deported to Auschwitz), and her mother (who died of malnutrition while interned in Dijon), she survived the war through a support network organized by the headmistress of Dijon's girls' *lycée*, Marcelle Pardé, a member of the Resistance later deported to Ravensbrück. In 1945, Rita Thalmann worked for a French Jewish child rescue organization, the *Oeuvre de secours aux enfants* (OSE), while preparing for her baccalaureate exam, which she passed in Strasbourg in 1948. Employed first as a primary and then as a secondary schoolteacher at the Yabné School, a Jewish institution in Paris, she began studying history and German studies at the Sorbonne. After several years of secondary school teaching she was appointed lecturer and then professor at the University of Tours, where she taught from 1966 to 1984, at which time she took up a chair at the University of Paris 7.
- 2 Drawing on her formidable memory in her 2004 autobiography, significantly entitled "It All Started in Nuremberg", Rita Thalmann relates in remarkable detail the early stages of a life that she described herself as "a lived experience between history and memory". Indeed, the episodes she highlights within the carefully chosen period, lasting from her brutal exile from the city of her birth to her studies at the Sorbonne and finally to her early years as a teacher in the 1950s and 1960s, provide insight into the deep motives both for her life choices and for her later engagements.
- 3 It was the memory, still sharp in her mind, of Streicher<sup>1</sup> and his troops shouting insults in German in the streets of Nuremberg – described in her autobiography as "that sudden and brutal eruption of violence... [which] probably affected me more than any other event" – that would bring her to choose what might have seemed an unlikely major at the Sorbonne in the early 1950s, German studies. But Rita Thalmann's decision

was quite deliberate, motivated by her deep conviction that only by studying the history and culture of Germany over the *longue durée* could one possibly come to understand its most recent history. She defends this personal choice in no uncertain terms:

After all we had been through, I felt the need to understand how this Germany, in the vanguard of culture, science, and technological progress, could have produced National Socialism.

- 4 Her experiences as an adolescent during those dark years in Dijon, when she saw her mother die of exhaustion in captivity and her father betrayed and deported to Auschwitz, also formed her character, building in her a deep revulsion for violence, injustice, and exclusion and a commitment to denounce and combat these scourges.
- 5 During her travels between Germany, Switzerland, and France, meeting women of courage and conviction like Marcelle Pardé, who were willing to risk their lives in order to save hers, shaped her future dedication to the fight for women's rights and to the organization *Choisir La Cause des femmes*, alongside Gisèle Halimi and others.
- 6 All of her later intellectual and social engagements – teaching as a means to foster understanding and transmit knowledge, union activism at the university to fight discrimination, fighting for women's equality and professional recognition, the struggle against antisemitism and racism and against all forms and discourses of exclusion and discrimination against minorities – found their source in these first stages of a life that would be devoted to their strict, single-minded pursuit. Her consummate art of finding connections between these diverse commitments also enabled Rita Thalmann to practice a productive trans-disciplinarity in all areas with her characteristic rigor.
- 7 Thus at the University of Tours she created in 1980, in addition to a very active Center for Germanic Studies and Research, an “Interregional center for research on women and feminism” which would be one of the organizers of the international colloquium held at the University of Toulouse Le Mirail on the same theme in 1982. This founding event, supported by the Ministries of Research and Women's Rights, led the French National Center of Scientific Research (CNRS) to create two Thematic Research Programs (ATPs) on women and feminist research, which lasted for the whole decade, and established women's history as an independent discipline in university curricula.
- 8 All of Rita Thalmann's teaching reflected her dual aims, to understand and to transmit. At the Sorbonne during the 1950s, she was fortunate to find several Germanists who were also seeking explanations for the latest turn in German history, and who became her professors and mentors. The first was Edmond Vermeil, whose important work *Allemagne. Essai d'explication* [Germany: An attempt to explain] was written, with a very explicit preface, in 1939, and published in 1945.<sup>2</sup> He strongly influenced Rita Thalmann's choice of topic for her thesis, which focused on the relationship between Protestantism and nationalism in Germany from 1900 to 1945. She established a true dialogue and lasting friendship with Robert Minder, a disciple of Romain Rolland and Albert Schweitzer and dedicated European, who was born in Alsace in 1902 and had witnessed with anguish both World Wars. Representing a “Germanic studies community that was conscious of its special responsibilities”, and concerned with teaching German civilization as explanatory cultural history *avant la lettre*, Minder opened up German studies to interdisciplinary and comparative perspectives. During the period, a number of historians had also begun to take part in multidisciplinary

teaching and research programs, a development Rita Thalmann took full advantage of and promoted ardently throughout her life. Rita Thalmann collaborated with Georges Castellan on his book on the Weimar Republic, published in 1969,<sup>3</sup> and she began to describe herself as both Germanist and historian, working at the intersection of the two disciplines. Her work reflects the thorough imbrication of her personal trajectory with her scholarly interests. After her thesis on Protestantism et nationalism in Germany, published in 1976, her books on Kristallnacht (1972), the Weimar Republic (1986), and ideology and security strategy in Occupied France (1991) underlined her continuing efforts to comprehend and promote understanding of the history that had shaped her own life [See Bibliography]. Here again, the blending of Rita Thalmann's intellectual and social commitments resulted in her tireless quest to open new, interdisciplinary avenues of research at the crossroads of her two main research fields: on the one hand, the history of Nazism and on the other, the history of women and of what she referred to more broadly, following Ernst Bloch, as "existential minorities". Thus her groundbreaking study *Être femme sous le III<sup>e</sup> Reich* (1981) [Being a woman under the Third Reich] addressed women's triple subjection under the "new masculine Nazi order", still a taboo subject at the time, setting off heated debates with several feminist scholars, notably Gisela Bock in Germany and Claudia Koonz in the United States. Numerous articles in journals such as *Allemagne d'aujourd'hui*, *Revue d'Allemagne*, *Matériaux pour l'histoire de notre temps*, as well as in her own edited volumes – *Femmes et Fascismes* (1987) and *Entre émancipation et nationalisme* (1990) – complete the scholarly profile of this meticulous interpreter of the history of her own time, who constantly sought to comprehend this history.

- 9 At the University of Paris 7, where interdisciplinary cooperation was well established, Rita Thalmann could work simultaneously in both of her areas of interest: German studies and the history of women, minorities, antisemitism and racism, a field that was developing rapidly there. She supported opening up German studies to include culture and civilization, and in 1985 created a center for Germanic studies and research that became the Centre d'études et de recherches intereuropéennes contemporaines (CERIC) [Center for Contemporary Inter-European Studies and Research]. A thoughtful and innovative analyst of women under Nazism, she introduced these research themes at the Centre d'Enseignement, de Documentation et de Recherches pour les Études Féministes (CEDREF) [Center for Teaching, Documentation, and Research in Feminist Studies]. She was an active contributor on these subjects, to Michelle Perrot's research group on women's history within the research unit on "History and Civilization of Western Societies". At Paris 7, Rita Thalmann's teaching included seminars on the history of women and minorities and the forms and discourses of exclusion and antisemitism, most notably a course entitled « Sex and Race ».
- 10 Both this seminar and the scholarly journal that emerged from it reflected Rita Thalmann's original approach, which involved starting with facts and events that had made an impact on her own life and then methodically returning to the sources to retrace in detail the emergence of all forms of social exclusion, both old and new. From the outset, seminar activities reflected the *longue durée* perspective necessary to understand the movement set off by a social Darwinism that would lead both to the racist ideology of National Socialism and to the Third Reich's extreme forms of exclusion and elimination, and which persist today in more recent forms of social exclusion. For a decade, the participants in the seminar set about deconstructing the key concepts of race and sex and systematically decoding all forms of exclusionary

discourse: the pseudoscientific discourses of the nineteenth century and their twentieth-century manifestations such as eugenics and racial hygiene; the legal discourse that facilitates implementation of exclusion; anti-feminist discourses combining racism and sexism; and the discourses that negated and normalized these different phenomena.

- 11 Thus, with a steadfastness of purpose and a moral authority born of her own lived experience, coupled with the conviction that scientific rigor and meticulous transmission were the only ways to understand history at its most extreme, Rita Thalmann returned tirelessly to the sources to track down words and historical discourses that could reveal the cultural, mental and political structures that had led to catastrophe, structures she believed remained in place in other forms.
- 12 Throughout her life, bearing witness meant trying to understand what had happened in the past in order to transmit to new generations – those whose lives were personally not “a lived experience between history and memory” – a message that was both as an *attempt to explain* and a *warning* of dangers to come.

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## NOTES

1. Director of the anti-Semitic review *Der Stürmer* and a Nazi *Gauleiter* from Franconia, the region in which Nuremberg is situated.
2. Edmond Vermeil, *L'Allemagne. Essai d'explication*, Paris, Gallimard, 1940 [seized and destroyed], 1945.

3. Georges Castellan, *L'Allemagne de Weimar*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1969.

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## AUTHORS

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