

Recall This Book  
Episode 164 Maurice Samuels: Jewish Assimilation, Integration  
and the Dreyfus Affair (JP)  
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**John Plotz**

Hello, and welcome to Recall This Book, where we invite scholars and writers from different disciplines to make sense of contemporary issues, problems, and events. I'm one of your longtime hosts from Brandeis University, John Plotz. So our topic today is on one level, a straightforward one, what it means and meant for Jewish immigrants to be either integrated or assimilated into Western European and New World societies.

So specifically, our guest today and Maury, I'm going to introduce you in a minute, but hello, has written a marvelous book exploring how that story goes inside France, long known and Maury, maybe you'll dispute this picture, but I think long known as a nation very conducive to a sort of universalist integration for Jews in the, I guess, post-Napoleonic era.

So there's so many wrinkles to this tale, I think. Probably a lot of listeners are familiar with the story we might call How the Jews Became White in the United States in the early 20th century. And of course, by comparison, few of us could ignore the way that integration and assimilation, and those are sort of two related categories that we want to unpack today, went so hideously, tragically wrong and off the rails in mid-20th century Germany, and hence for basically all of Europe as well.

But those cases, the sort of German tragedy and the American whitewashing, I guess we could call it, are not the only examples. And in some ways, the most fascinating case of all is the nation that my guest today, Maury Samuels of Yale University, has spent his scholarly career studying.

That is France. OK, so Maurie, you have many books. I'm not going to talk about them all, but I think at least three of them. relate to this story. There is *Inventing the Israelite* from 2010, and *The Right to Difference*, 2016. And finally, most recently is part of the Jewish Lives series by Yale University Press, *Alfred Dreyfus, The Man at the Center of the Affair*.

And can I just stop? Did I miss any other books that are on this? Okay.

**Maurice Samuels**

Well, yeah, I mean, there's also the Betrayal of the Duchess, which is about the first anti-Semitic affair.

**John Plotz**

Oh, right. Okay. Okay. Okay. My fault. Thank you. So he's also, so among other things, Maurie has been since 2011, the director and was in fact the inaugural director of the Yale program for the study of anti-Semitism. which you have held, I guess, through, I guess we might call them fat years and lean years.

I don't know if you want to characterize this year, but through splendid times and through challenging ones. But so, Maurie, you and I have known each other even longer, I think since 1987?

**Maurice Samuels**

Yeah, I was wondering if you were going to disclose that. You and I went to college and grad school.

**John Plotz**

And grad school, that's true. I do not remember where we first met. Do you remember?

**Maurice Samuels**

Probably in the Dunster House dining hall.

**John Plotz**

That seems very likely, yeah. But I never really thought I would be squaring up to a Zoom screen with you, but I'm really delighted to. And I will just start by saying that I absolutely adored this book that I hold in my hot little hand about Dreyfus.

And it opened up for me so many fascinating topics, not just about the particularity of the fate of Jews in France, but also much broader. It helped me think in a different way about the role about the pivotal or problematic role that Jews have played inside cosmopolitan Western societies, or maybe now we should say, quote, cosmopolitan Western societies.

So if you think about the notion of the Great Replacement theory and the role that Jews play in it, you know, just there's so many ways in which there's a kind of centrality of this category, whether we call it an ethnic or racial or religious category.

And you really helped me think about that. And you really helped me think about the difference between what it means to be assimilated and integrated into one of these societies. You helped me think about how Hannah Arendt is wrong about these categories, which is something I hate to admit, but it is always helpful when it's pointed out to me.

And so, you know, Welcome. It's great to have you here.

### **Maurice Samuels**

Thank you. I'm so happy to be here and to get to talk about this stuff with you. And I could effusively praise your books also. And anyway, it's exciting.

### **John Plotz**

Don't do that. Don't do that. Yeah, it would be much shorter conversation. We don't need to do it anyway. So, Maurie, we love to start off just as a way of getting the ball rolling. to invite people to begin laying out what the key claims are of a recent book.

Say its intervention or the things you think that any possible reader ought to know about it.

### **Maurice Samuels**

Sure. So I was invited to write this biography of Dreyfus, of Alfred Dreyfus, for the Jewish Lives series at Yale Press. And They said from the beginning that the point was not to uncover original research, which

I did try to do a little bit, and I'll come back to that, but to have a kind of fresh take on the person.

for Dreyfus, that was a hard thing to do in a way because there's so much written about him. I think I say in the book that after the French Revolution, it's the next most written about event in French history. So I spent a lot of time reading all that scholarship.

I was familiar with a lot of it, but I did more reading. And I came to the conclusion that the Jewish dimension of the affair was kind of underplayed in a lot of the scholarship. And so that's not to say that people don't mention that Dreyfus is Jewish, like literally every book says that Dreyfus is Jewish.

If people know anything about Dreyfus, it's that he was a Jewish officer in the French army. But Jewishness is rarely the focus of scholarship about Dreyfus or about the Dreyfus affair.

### **John Plotz**

And hey, Maurie, I should have backed you up here to begin. Give us the, I won't say the Wikipedia account, but give us the Shilling Life account. So he was a high officer in the French army accused of...

### **Maurice Samuels**

Yeah. Okay. So the short version is that in 1894, Alfred Dreyfus, who was a captain in the French army and an intern on the army's general staff, which was pretty high up, was falsely accused of having sold military secrets to Germany. He was given a very short court-martial, found guilty based on trumped-up evidence that his lawyers didn't...

The prosecution did not show to his lawyers and sent off to, uh, serve a life sentence on Devil's Island, off the coast of South America. This incredibly brutal prison where he was the only prisoner. Meanwhile, back at home, his his wife and his brother tried to prove his innocence.

Um, they, uh. spent years trying to interest people in the case. They eventually did. They uncovered proof, first of all, of who the real traitor was. And it was this guy named Esterhazy. They gradually got some prominent people interested in Dreyfus's plight, including the popular novelist, Emile Zola, who writes the famous article, "J'accuse", I

accuse, which basically blew the lid off the case, showing how the army had conspired to frame Dreyfus and to protect the real traitor.

So he was brought back for a second trial. He was unbelievably found guilty yet again, even though the evidence was so blatant that he was innocent. And at that point, the French government realized it had a real scandal on its hands that it had to put to rest.

Other countries were threatening to boycott France if they didn't free Dreyfus, and so he was given a pardon. That was in 1899, but it took until 1906 for the army finally to declare Dreyfus fully innocent and reinstate him in the army.

### **John Plotz**

Okay, great. Now, and actually, can I just ask about the Zola thing? Am I right in remembering that Jekyll is also sort of a pivotal turning point in Zola's career, but maybe even in the sort of the status of the notion of the public intellectual?

### **Maurice Samuels**

Yeah, totally. So Zola was a prominent and wealthy writer, and he really took a major risk in doing this, something that he knew he was doing, by accusing the top brass of the army of basically collusion and coverup, his gambit was that he was forcing them to sue him for slander, which would bring, that would be a civil case, unlike the military court-martials of Dreyfus where they were able to suppress evidence.

So in a civil case, the evidence would come to light and that's exactly what happened. So he did bring more evidence to light, but they found him guilty of slander. He was forced to go into exile in England. He escaped to England for a couple of years.

And then he came back when there was a general amnesty after the Dreyfus's pardon, but people say that Zola may have been murdered by a pro, an anti-Dreyfusard, excuse me, because he was found dead a couple of years later of carbon monoxide poisoning and his chimney had been stopped up.

So, you know, he definitely is like a true hero of the affair.

### **John Plotz**

Wow. I totally missed that.

**Maurice Samuels**

Yeah. And as you said, the, the notion of the public intellectual of someone who is known for writing or for scientific achievement, but weighs in, takes a stand on a political issue, that notion of the intellectual, of that definition of the intellectual really dates to the affair.

**John Plotz**

So this is just one thread to pull and we don't have to if you don't want to. But one thing I really liked and you're going to correct the formulation for me, but there's a sort of nice Venn diagram formulation you have that not that that there are forces.

I mean, I guess to call all reactionary forces anti-modernist is wrong, but there are forces that are seen as in opposition to modernizing or modernity. Obviously, Zola is presumably the incarnation of modernity in many ways. And I think the way you characterized it is that not is that not every force of modernity and not every modernizer is Jewish, but Jews basically connote modernity.

**Maurice Samuels**

Yeah, yeah, that's true. And also, yeah, the Jews became a kind of metaphor for modernity. They were associated with modernity in the writings of anti-Semites going back to really, you could say, like the 1840s in France. And they were seen as... avatars of the new capitalist system of finance capitalism.

**John Plotz**

But they were also- Well, Karl Marx says the same thing, doesn't he?

**Maurice Samuels**

Yeah, in the 1840s, he writes "On the Jewish question." He's actually living in Paris at that point. Yeah, and writes that Jews, you

know, that Judaism is a religion of huckstering. But the difference is that Marx, who himself had been born Jewish, doesn't single out individual actual Jews.

He, you know, it's really more of a metaphor for him, whereas the anti-Semites really did start labeling, you know, attacking individual Jews. And that really comes to a kind of peak in 1886 in France, when this journalist named Edouard Drumond writes a book called *La France Juive*, (so Jewish France) It's like a thousand-page screed, basically associating Jews with everything that's bad about the modern world, from capitalism, but everything basically, to urbanization, to all kinds of nefarious ploys. It's like a litany of attacks on specific Jews, and that's what really sets the table for the Dreyfus Affair eight years later.

**John Plotz**

This may seem too arcane, but since I wrote about Daniel Deronda at some point in my career, and I think a lot about George Eliot, one thing you see in England is that for sure, Jews, let's say for a writer like Trollope--

**Maurice Samuels**

Yeah, in *The Way We Live Now*.

**John Plotz**

*The Way We Live Now*, but actually other places too. I'm always reading a Trollope novel that I completely enjoy. And then all of a sudden there's a random minister who converted from Judaism and he turns out to be the worst minister there is. I mean, it's everywhere.

But for Trollope, they clearly connote that kind of incarnation of modernity run amok, the worst kind of reification.

**Maurice Samuels**

Yeah, even that ability to change your identity.

**John Plotz**

Of course, being protean. Right. But I guess the wrinkle I was going to get at is that at least in England, they also stand for some kind of ancient biblical wisdom, let's say

**Maurice Samuels**

I don't know. Yeah, there's a Protestant philo-Semitism that is very noticeable in England. I mean, the same thing I could say, you know, the founders of Yale were part of that. And that's why Yale has Hebrew on its, you know, motto.

**John Plotz**

That's interesting. I didn't know that. (That doesn't explain Brandeis, however, but yes, okay.)

**Maurice Samuels**

But the joke was that at Yale, that if you could actually read the motto, you would not be let in.

**John Plotz**

Oh, that's really funny. But actually, you're taking it a different way from the way I meant it. So can I just continue? My thought was that in England, and I think this is true of Daniel Deronda, there's something... admirable and yet passé and residual.

In other words, that the Jews are an ancient desert people like they have in Werner Sombart's terms, they have the kind of ancient, you know, sort of ancient ethnic particularity, which makes them subject to a different kind of prejudice. I hear your point about how that might be admired, but I think it's also denigrated at the same time.

**Maurice Samuels**

Yeah. Yeah. And yeah, there's that's certainly part of the kind of supersessionist you know, ethos of Christianity.



**John Plotz**

Yeah, exactly. The people of the book and then the people of the soul.

**Maurice Samuels**

Yeah, I think it's true of both Protestants and Catholics. But in France, they have less of the Protestant philo-Semitism. And, you know, they... And in fact, you know, the Protestants in France are also like a very discriminated against minority, very similar to Jews.

And they were by and large, not opposed to Dreyfus.

**John Plotz**

That's interesting. Actually, maybe that's a good occasion to dig into the particularity because one, another thing I learned from your wonderful book was that there's not, I mean, even setting aside North Africa, there's not one but two distinct Jewish communities, like longstanding communities.

One, which is, I believe, called Sephardic down in the South, and then another Alsatian German, which I suppose is an Ashkenazi.

**Maurice Samuels**

Yes, exactly. Yeah. So one of the particular particularities of French Franco Judaism, as people call it, is this mixing of different kinds of Jews. So so I mean, just a short thing is the Jews were kicked out of France, of the Kingdom of France at the end of the 14th century and technically not allowed to reside in the kingdom until the French Revolution.

But there were some exceptions. So there were a couple thousand Sephardic Jews who fled Spain and Portugal during the Spanish Inquisition, who settled in the southwest, like around Bordeaux. There was also a small community of Jews in Provence who had never left, but that area didn't become part of France until after the French Revolution.

Those Jews were locked in ghettos until the Revolution. And then there was a community of about 20,000 to 30,000 Jews who were Ashkenazi in Alsace and Lorraine, so in eastern France. And when

France acquired those territories in the 17th century, they considered expelling the Jews, Louis XIV, but he allows them to stay.

But there are all kinds of restrictions. They're banned from living in towns and cities. They're restricted to certain occupations, which is why a lot become money lenders and kind of small scale commerce. And the main thing that distinguishes the French case is that all of these Jews were emancipated during the French Revolution.

So they were the first Jews in Europe to gain full civil rights. And it happens in 1790 for the Sephardic Jews and 1791 for the Ashkenazi Jews. And that's long before other countries. So in England, Jews have a lot of rights, but they can't sit in parliament until the 1850s.

Unconverted Jews can't sit in parliament. And in most of the German states, they don't get full civil rights until 1870. So France is really ahead of the game where Jews have total and complete equality as of 1791, which is what allows a Jew like Dreyfus to achieve such a high rank in the army.

### **John Plotz**

That's great. So, okay. So I want to go down the Dreyfus pathway, but can I just put down a pin here because talking about 1790 and 91 made me of course think about Haiti and how the French revolution is also a problem, you know, like the American revolution, it's a problem of management of colonial affairs as well.

So obviously Haitians get treated very differently in the French revolution. Is there any connection? Is there any story?

### **Maurice Samuels**

Oh yeah, there totally is. Because in fact, the big defender of the Jews among the revolutionaries is this guy named the Abbe Grégoire, who was a revolutionary priest from Lorraine, who was also the big defender of the slaves, of the blacks in the colonies.

So the revolutionaries emancipate the Jews. They then emancipate later the black slaves in the colonies. I should say, of course, that all of this only applies to men because women don't get the vote in France until after the Second World War. And then famously and horrifically, France backslides under Napoleon, where he re-enslaves the blacks, but he maintains Jewish emancipation with some exceptions.

So he passes these kind of harsh laws that only apply to Jews, which is really in, you know, you know, like violates the principle of the revolution of equality before the law.

So some people talk about him undoing Jewish emancipation as well. But it's you know, that is partly the case. And then that under the restoration in the 1820s, they get rid of those restrictive laws. So by the 1820s, again, the Jews have full equality.

And then, of course, France frees the slaves definitively in 1848. Yeah.

### **John Plotz**

I would love to get to a 20th century question, which is the question of.... You know, I mentioned the Great Replacement Theory more recently, and I'm thinking about this status that Jews have where they get. In some ways, they are the victims of colonialist practices and practices of like civil inequality, and then in other ways.

And you could think about the story that people tell about Jewish slave owners in America, they're also beneficiaries of. like an inegalitarian society. So in a way, the reason to raise North Africa was to sort of get at that question, which we may not be able to get to....

### **Maurice Samuels**

Yeah, no, it's a really interesting question. And I think looking at North Africa is totally right on. In Algeria, so France conquers Algeria in 1830, and it gets this population of indigenous Muslims and Jews. And Jews actually are pretty numerous in Algeria, especially in the cities.

And at first, France treats the Jews and the Muslims the same. So it does not give Jews civil rights. But then in 1870, it gives the Jews citizenship in Algeria, but not the Muslims. So it's a clear case of using pitting one ethnic group against another.

And, you know, scholars have said that the revolutionaries were doing something kind of similar that they gave, you know, people have asked, like, why did they bother to give citizenship to the Jews? I mean, there were only like 40,000 Jews out of 25 million French people.

They were this like, really, you know, um, very marginal group. Literally, they lived on the margins, on the borders of French society, but also they spoke Yiddish. They were really not part of French society.

Why did they bother to debate this, let alone to give citizenship to Jews when they had so many other issues on their mind?

I argue in my book, *The Right to Difference*, that they did it because the Jews were so different that it allowed them to show just how universalist they could be. So that the Jews were a good test case for that. And as other scholars have pointed out, partly they were a good test case because there weren't that many of them.

So there wasn't that much at stake when they gave the Jews.

### **John Plotz**

So the distinction would be like, I just happened to read that Yuri Slezkine book, *The Jewish Century*, and in Germany, the Jews, like the number of, I feel like in Berlin, 70% of the lawyers were Jewish. Some very large percentage of professors were Jewish.

In other words, they were actually a substantial enough population.

### **Maurice Samuels**

Right. There were many more. I mean, you know, there were, you know, hundreds of thousands versus just, you know, 40,000.

### **John Plotz**

So just to pick up your point about the periphery, I want to bring us back to Dreyfus because the particular case you're making about his case, integrated slash assimilated family is so interesting. You speak of them as being on the margin, but of course, by Dreyfus's generation, a lot of the family are in fact living in Paris, right?

### **Maurice Samuels**

Or some of the family. Sort of, yeah. I mean, he's born in Mulhouse, which is in Alsace, almost in the far Eastern part of France on the border with Switzerland. But then he France loses those provinces in 1870, which is a key part of the story. And during the Franco-Prussian War, the newly unified Germany takes Alsace and Lorraine, occupying Dreyfus's homeland.

His family, like many of the Jews in Alsace, opt for French citizenship. And Dreyfus, Alfred Dreyfus is a young, man, young boy at that point, and he gets sent to boarding school in Paris. But the family maintains its residency in Alsace throughout this period.

So his family is not, for the most part, in Paris, but he marries into a really well-integrated Parisian Jewish family. So his wife, Lucie Adamar, is from a family that's kind of farther along on the you know, path towards integration than his.

### **John Plotz**

And so none of the family are particularly religious, like their sense of themselves as Jewish is maybe that's what we could talk about. It's like what it means for them to consider themselves.

### **Maurice Samuels**

Yeah, it's really interesting. So that's one of the things I tried to ask in the book, like, what did Jewishness mean for Dreyfus and his family? And I'm building here on there's a good book by an American scholar named Michael Burns called Dreyfus, A Family Affair, where he talks about the different members of the family.

So it's true that Dreyfus himself was not religious, personally. He saw himself as a scientist and a rationalist. But Lucy, his wife, was pretty religious. And I found, which was really interesting, I got to work in the archive of the Jewish Museum in Paris, where they have a big collection given by Dreyfus's descendants fairly recently.

And there are lots of Jewish ritual objects in there, like yard site calendars, where they would, you know, know when to say prayers for dead relatives based on Hebrew calendar, Lucy's Hebrew prayer book. So, you know, what I found was that they were, they were nominally Orthodox and that's like, Another thing that distinguishes French Judaism from German or American, which is that the reform movement never really takes hold.

So if you're going to practice at all, it's going to be in official Orthodox synagogues, which are run by this kind of government ministry called the consistory, which is under the umbrella of the government. But Dreyfus and his wife were married in synagogue.

So I wouldn't say that they were not practicing. They attended on holidays. They attended synagogue. They were married by the chief rabbi of France, who was a friend of the family. So it wasn't like they were completely assimilated Jews in that sense.

**John Plotz**

So I guess I hadn't thought about that. So the reform movement, forgive me, this is just ignorant. So it starts already in the late 19th century? It's starting in Germany?

**Maurice Samuels**

No, it starts in the early 19th century, actually.

**John Plotz**

No kidding? Wow.

**Maurice Samuels**

Yeah, It starts in Germany in the early 19th century. And it's, you know, the German case is different because in Germany, the Jews are trying to prove their worthiness for emancipation. And part of that is by... modernizing Jewish religious practice. The reform movement is part of that.

It's also a way that Jewish leaders find to keep Jews affiliated. They relax some of the requirements of being Jewish. through the reform movement. And that spreads to America when a lot of German Jews start immigrating to the United States in the 1840s.

So there's a splintering of Judaism in those countries that doesn't happen in France, because as I say, it's tightly controlled by the consistory.

**John Plotz**

So can I use that? This, I think, connects with Marx on the Jewish Question And the hucksterism, maybe it even can, connects to Eliot's notion in Daniel Deronda that something that's admirable about Jews is

how like, visibly other, they are. So there's clearly the anti-semitism of Germany.

And I I think we need to probably fit in the story of the Roma here as well. But it has to do with like groups that are, um. dangerously parasitical because they're invisibly different or something like what's at stake is the problem that they might be truly different.

Although, you know, although superficially the same. And I hear you saying from your other book, which forgive me more, I don't, I do not remember that book that your argument about the difference, but you, I hear you saying that in France, the, the appeal of toleration is predicated on the palpable marked difference is that so, is that consistent, or is that like, Yeah, I mean, so what happens is that was true during the French Revolution, when the Jews were very different?

### **Maurice Samuels**

But what happens is as soon as they get emancipated, they stop being so different. So they start dressing like everybody else, they start speaking like everybody else. They, you know, they, they blend in, yeah, that, you know, so other people have theorized that that's what leads to biological racism against Jews, biological. And so they, anti-Semites have to come up with a different basis for Jewish difference for how to, you know, tell who's a Jew basically. And so they start to, you know, look at for racial features and that's when they really like, you know, spin a whole thing that the Jew is fundamentally, you know, biologically different.

### **John Plotz**

Yeah, that's really interesting, because, I mean, I think I I know. That story about the rise of biological racism in the 19th century, it's a story in England as well, and I think in America. The easiest path to it is that, like, once slavery has been abolished, you no longer have legal compartmentalization, so you need a different kind of biopolitics.

But it's fascinating to think about historically, the need to differentiate Jews and the need to differentiate Black like ex-slave quote. you know, population.

### **Maurice Samuels**

Definitely. And there's a lot of overlap and kind of cross-pollination between European racists who were very fixated on Jews and American racists who were fixated on blacks.

### **John Plotz**

That's fascinating. Yeah. So I mean, OK, so there's so many different paths here, but like, can we think a little bit about part of your intervention in the book, I think, is to say that there's no element, and this I think is part of the correction against Arendt, who I know has no historical authority on this, but that there's no, it's wrong to think about Dreyfus as attempting to move away from or deny that Jewish work.

### **Maurice Samuels**

Yeah, so that's a big, you asked me like what are some of the big takeaways of the book, and that's a big one. So Hannah Arendt in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is trying to make this argument that French Jews were unprepared for World War II and the Holocaust. She does this historical sketch where she says they were in the midst of a disintegrating process of assimilation, where they were in the rush to become French, they had just abandoned all connection with the Jewish people. She actually singles out Dreyfus, as an example of that, presumably because he became an army officer.

I try to show in the book, I make a distinction between assimilation, which I think connotes giving up any Jewish affiliation or identity, and integration, which means feeling part of the dominant culture, but maintaining the specificity of your prior identity at the same time. And I say that for Jews in France like Dreyfus, they're clearly in the second category. So they were a subculture that was fully French. He saw no contradiction. Like Arendt seems to see a contradiction. Like you can't be an army officer and also be a Jew, which is of course what the anti-Semites thought. But according to the notion of Frenchness inherited from the French Revolution, which is the notion of Frenchness that Dreyfus subscribed to, and that the left subscribed to, and that was the official ideology of the Republic, They could be fully French and fully Jewish. There was no contradiction.



**John Plotz**

Okay, so this is great. I think we're not going to quarrel about this exactly, but I want to unpack this a little bit more because as you were speaking, I was thinking about there's so many ways that I think you and I discussed before how our own family background plays into this. And for me, you know, I grew up certainly very – very much thinking of myself as American, certainly knowing that my family were Jewish, but not necessarily taking that as my own identity. And then Thanksgiving, the celebration of Thanksgiving was always incredibly important in my family.

And I realized in retrospect, it was kind of a subtractive thing. Like we weren't gonna celebrate Christmas for sure. We didn't really, Hanukkah wasn't that big a deal, but Thanksgiving kind of, it ticked all the boxes...

**Maurice Samuels**

in my family, it was like going to Chicago Bears games. It replaced, I feel like Shabbat, you know, this is what we do on the weekend.

**John Plotz**

And if you read Willa Cather on 4th of July, on like the fireworks of 4th of July, like there are these images of this kind of [unity...]

**Maurice Samuels**

I mean, it's because, you know, the United States and France saw themselves as, or certain, you know, elements of them officially, the ideology of both countries was that anyone could take on the national identity. They were, you know, open societies where identity was based on just believing in the nation...

**John Plotz**

But okay, so two different directions on that. Direction one, "how the Jews became white", which is also how the Irish became white, that

in America, there's obviously a highly specific racial exemption for that, right? That is true as long as you pass the one-drop rule. Is there an equivalent for that in France or no?

**Maurice Samuels**

Well, it becomes, that's what the debate is about over Jews. So officially, no, you know, officially Jews are as equal, you know, are equal Frenchmen like anyone else. But of course, there's a large percentage of people in France who don't subscribe to that, who have a much more, I would say, kind of German blood and soil idea of who constitutes French person. And, you know, I would say the same thing is true in the US. So like, you know, the after, you know, emancipation, the, you know, theoretically everyone is American, but of course, a lot of people don't believe that. And I think we're seeing now that a lot of people still don't believe that.

**John Plotz**

Right. That was a dog-whistle ideology that's actually far more than a dog-whistle. This is the conflict.

**Maurice Samuels**

This is the conflict. This is what the Dreyfus affair ultimately is about, I think. The case becomes so interesting to people and it captures the... attention of France and the world because it brought to the fore exactly that conflict.

Who has a right to be part of the modern nation state? Is it based on just wanting to be that and being a good loyal citizen, or is it based on blood and ancestry? That was one of the issues at stake in the Dreyfus Affair. That's what was essentially the Jewish question.

That's what the Jewish question was asking as Jews were flocking to all of these Western European democracies, it was forcing them to confront that fundamental question of who is a citizen.

**John Plotz**

So this maybe obviates the second strain of my question, but I also want to ask you, and this may be a slightly passé question to use to think about France, but when I think about France and the question of, you know, the space for difference in France. Like you just described a situation in which the Dreyfus family, let's say, could unproblematically feel that they remained adherent in their Jewishness, but also that they were fully functioning citizens of France. So we hear a lot about this concept of Laïcité, right?

**Maurice Samuels**

The laity-ness, like the kind of- Yeah, secular, it's- Secularism, secularism, yeah.

**John Plotz**

So how, I mean, How is that squared with the notion of retaining an um ethnically/religiously particular idea?

**Maurice Samuels**

Right?

**John Plotz**

Well, identity?

**Maurice Samuels**

Yeah, they're, they're in conflict, so that that's, you know, partly the that's what the. The kind of what people call the Franco-French war, like guerre Franco-Francaise, is essentially over that question, over you know who. is it's this war between the left and the right in France that starts during the French Revolution and arguably is still going on now.

**John Plotz**

Wait, so that's just a term of art? I've never heard that expression. It's totally fascinating.

**Maurice Samuels**

Yeah, yeah. It's this internal civil war within France over, you know, what kind of nation they are. And it's also, you know...

**John Plotz**

So we have that in the United States as well then?

**Maurice Samuels**

Yeah. Yeah, okay. And secularism, state secularism is certainly part of it. Like, is France a Catholic country? Or is France a secular country where religion is a matter of private conscience? And France struggles with that. So officially, the French Revolution radically gets rid of all religion.

It banishes the Catholic Church. I mean, it was a wild thing to do. Napoleon invites the church back in. And then over the course of the 19th century, the church reacquires some of its power, there's though a struggle between the forces of secularism and the forces of religion, which are basically the forces of Catholicism throughout the century.

And that's another thing that's at stake in the Dreyfus affair. The church plays a really nefarious role. They take a strong stance against Dreyfus, and it's partly because they see this as the chance to reimpose their authority.

**John Plotz**

Really get that, Maurie, but based on the model that I heard you lay out a few minutes ago, wouldn't the very identity of the Dreyfus family be like intention with a secularist account of what France is?

**Maurice Samuels**

Well, okay. Yeah. That's really interesting because secularism, so *laïcité* comes to mean something else. So now we tend to think that it means in the French case, the radical exclusion of religion.

**John Plotz**

Yeah, I mean, I think about the ban on Muslim headdress in France.

**Maurice Samuels**

Yes, exactly. But the fact is that that's a relatively recent meaning of laïcité that partly comes... I mean, it's a complicated history, but it partly comes to mean what it does now, this kind of hard line secularism as a result of the Dreyfus Affair.

So it's after the Dreyfus Affair that the left comes to power and pushes through the separation of church and state in 1905. specifically to get revenge on the church for its role during the Dreyfus Affair. Prior to that, in the 19th century, laïcité meant that the three major religions in France, so Catholicism, Protestantism, and Judaism, and Catholicism was by far the dominant, like over 95%, that they would be treated equally. So you get, like in the 1830s, uh the French government is paying the salaries of priests ministers and rabbis right which is really interesting and that lasts until 1905.

**John Plotz:**

So this is a little bit of a wrench but like i just want to get us from Dreyfus and from this turn of the century moment you also say something you said something really interesting i heard you speak recently and you talked about this you know, the existence within the Jewish community of sort of an impulse, this integrationist impulse.

You talked about the rise of Zionism, which we should get to also. And then you also talked about radicalism or socialism. Like, you know, I had relatives who were Jewish Bund members back in the 30s. So I sort of recognize that. All of those things seem to be part of the backstory of the rise of this incredibly fascinating and improbable prime minister, the last prime minister before the fall of the pre-Nazi regime, Leon Blum.

This is this wonderful book by Pierre Birnbaum, but clearly you've thought about Blum as well. Can you tell us, can you fit Blum into the story a little bit?

### **Maurice Samuels**

Yeah, totally, because in fact, Blum, His whole career, I would say, is made possible by the Dreyfus Affair. He's a young man who had brilliant studies and attends the top schools. He's from a Jewish family. He becomes interested in Dreyfus's innocence and becomes a big militant in support of Dreyfus during the Dreyfus Affair.

but it's really the affair and the triumph of the left that kind of catapults someone like Blum into power. So he's from a bourgeois family, but not particularly well-to-do. They weren't like, you know, they were, you know, kind of, I would say middle-class Jews, but he becomes a socialist and he comes to power.

He becomes essentially prime minister in France in the 1930s in this popular front against fascism. And he pushes through incredible progressive legislation in France. So he's the inventor of the weekend in France and of paid time off. And French workers are incredibly indebted to him.

But he also, and this is one of the things that I think this book by Pierre Birnbaum that you referred to, which is in the same series as my book, the Jewish Life series, that he shows just that Blum was on the receiving end of horrific anti-Semitism.

I mean, all of the kind of rage against Jews, all of that right wing, that you know, the kind of blood and soil kind of side of the Franco-French war, they are inflamed with, you know, rage when he becomes prime minister. And in fact, when he's being sworn in, this guy Xavier Vallée makes this speech that's like really famous.

And he said, this is the first time, I'm going to get it kind of wrong, but that the peasant nation of France is being governed by a Jew whom he calls like a subtle Talmudist. And the hall erupts in, you know, it's a shocking thing to say, but, you know, so Bloom becomes, you know, the kind of lightning rod for that same war in the same way that Dreyfus had been.

### **John Plotz**

I'm trying to remember who it was, one of the former... British conservative prime ministers. I think it might might have been, Heath

said of Thatcher's government, that there were more Estonians than Etonians in it. It's not as memorable, but it's the equivalent.

But, you know, it's also 60 years later. The other thing about Bloom that I was hoping you could contextualize a little bit is that he's, I mean, I don't know how. public his private life was. But I mean, he struck me as almost like a Thomas Hardy character. He's somebody who doesn't really believe in the rules of conventional marriage....

**Maurice Samuels**

Oh yeah, he writes this, you know, treatise on marriage. He's also like this dandy and kind of, you know, literary critic. I mean, this is one of the things that like makes France like that someone who like basically writes his theater reviews can then become, you know, prime minister.

I would love to, if I can just ask you a question about how he compares to Disraeli, because in fact, in that horrible speech by Xavier Valla, he brings up Disraeli as the example. Like, well, England has already had its Jewish leader, but France... Hasn't, but of course, Disraeli had converted, right?

**John Plotz**

I think his father converted.

**Maurice Samuels**

I actually think he was born, I thought he was still. I thought he was converted as a child.

**John Plotz**

Maybe that's right, he was converted as a child. You're right, but it's certainly below the level of cognition. Yeah, yeah, and though it's interesting, I mean, I, I can't speak too much. I mean, I think he's, I think as a young Tory, he's kind of fascinating, like in my mind, I, I almost connect him with somebody like that George Herbert Walker Bush, like it's the world of like these conservatives who are conservative, but they make their, they have a, I don't know, there's just something, do you

know the expression, the wet Tories? There's something soft about them.

So he's an interesting, I mean, I suppose the best analogy might be, you could say that his Jewishness is a little bit like Thatcher's being a woman, that it opens up another side of his identity and makes him be able to govern more effectively as a conservative.

But that seems radically different from what Bloom is doing.

### **Maurice Samuels**

Although both of them were kind of dandies. And they wrote, you know, like Disraeli was writing these novels.

### **John Plotz**

He was, and the novels are very Jewish. I mean, the novel like *Coningsby* and *Tancred* both have like significant Jewish plots in them. In which the Jews, by the way, are depicted as like... heroically residual. You know, they're like the past, you know, past tribal generations.

### **Maurice Samuels**

But I think there was something like for Disraeli where it was like his sort of exoticism. Yeah. He played it to his advantage, whereas like for Bloom, you know, Bloom's as a socialist was theoretically universalist. So I think he's sort of less public about his, but as Birnbaum shows, and I found that very interesting, Blum never tries to hide his Jewishness and is pretty open.

And so his response to that horrifying attack is to say, I have nothing to be ashamed of as a Jew. So he kind of stands up for himself. And he's, you know, incredibly brave. He's the victim of physical attacks. He's then, you know, put in concentration camps by the Nazis.

### **John Plotz**

Yeah, that part is incredible to me. It's incredible they didn't kill him.



**Maurice Samuels**

It's incredible.

**John Plotz**

It's like... Didn't he become prime minister again?

**Maurice Samuels**

Yeah, he becomes prime minister again right after the war for a very short period. But they do murder his brother. His brother dies in Auschwitz. But they realize he's so important that they kind of give him privileged treatment in Buchenwald. But still, he's a really fascinating character.

And the other thing that people don't realize and that I think really... marks the specificity of France is that he's the first of actually, you know, like half a dozen prime ministers of Jewish origin in France. So, you know, there are many, no other country except for Israel has a record like that.

I mean, in America, there's no, you know, we haven't had a leader of government who's Jewish, but in France, there's Pierre Mendes France in the 1950s. And then you know, just in the last few years, you know, under Macron, there've been two, you know, not all of them were, you know, practicing Jews, but some of them were.

So, you know, Mendez-France was...

**John Plotz**

That is totally interesting. So Maurie, I'm just going to ask you this. It's off of our path, but it's like a question I've been bringing up with people who are thinking about kind of the monstrosity of mid-20th century racism. How do you play out, or do you play out at all the analogy to other stigmatized groups?

You mentioned Protestants in France, and that's extremely helpful, but I kind of wanted to ask about the Roma who probably don't even figure into France at all.

**Maurice Samuels**

But you know, like, yeah, I don't know that much about that. You know, they're not, um, I mean, they are, you know, a presence. And like, you know, you see them in, like Victor Hugo's novel, you know, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, Yeah, there's. Roma figure.

But in France, there's, of course, a black difference in the colonies. Then in North Africa, there's the issue of the indigenous Arab Muslim population. And that winds up being incredibly significant in France. And still now, that's the dominant question now.

So in many ways, you could say that, you know, Muslims are the new Jews in France, that these questions about identity that were worked out by fighting over Jews through the Dreyfus affair, through World War II, are now being fought over.

### **John Plotz**

And could you make the cynical argument, which people certainly have made in the British context, that not only would Arab Muslims or Muslims in general in the Middle East be the new Jews, but also that they are in some ways disadvantaged because Jews got preferential treatment in those.

### **Maurice Samuels**

Yeah, I mean, that's certainly an argument that people have made in Algeria, you know, that in 1870, the Jews get citizenship and the Muslims don't. And that obviously creates, you know, like further tensions, you know, between those groups. And so then, when Algeria gets independence in the, you know, 1962, the Jews are not, you know, considered part of the new nation and almost all of them leave, you know, at that point.

And, you know, so that.

### **John Plotz**

To be fair, you could blame that one on the British, though, because you could say that's a product of the way that Israel was precipitated into like most favored nation status.

**Maurice Samuels**  
You don't think so?

**John Plotz**  
You think it's more, you think it's internal?

**Maurice Samuels**

I think that's probably a more, I think that that's what plays out in other Muslim countries where basically after 1948, Jews leave all Muslim countries for the most part after the creation of Israel, but for slightly different reasons in different places.

So in France, though, in Algeria, I think it's largely because the Jews were seen, they were kind of, identified with the colonists, you know, so with the Pied-Noir population, and so they're, you know, because they did have, you know, civil rights, they voted in French elections and things like that, whereas, you know, the Muslims didn't.

So, yeah, I mean, I think that that, and so, you know, you could say that that preferential treatment given to Jews at the time is still, you know, kind of beef, you know, between the communities and, you know, part of the kind of inter-communal, yeah, yeah.

**John Plotz**

We kind of got to leave it there, but I mean, I want to do an episode on just like the exact semantic weight of this notion of the Replacement Theory, because it is bizarre to think about Jews as being the ones who are quote, doing the replacing in the American context, but what they're replacing- white Americans with is non-white people.

**Maurice Samuels**

Right, and of course that concept comes from this guy, as far as I know, this guy, Renaud Camus in France, who, you know, and people have been, you know, like him, think that, you know, France has, you know, that white French people, white Christian French people are being replaced by Arabs.

Yeah.

**John Plotz**

I still remember my meal at, okay, forgive me, but the restaurant is called, is it called Nos Ancestres Les Galois? I remember going there with a highly racially mixed group of French people to eat like chunks of meat and pickle.

**Maurice Samuels**

Yeah, it used to be like on the Ile Saint-Louis. But that was the famous thing that in French... French textbooks. So, you know, France had this idea of assimilating the empire. So, like, you could be in, you know, Senegal and, you know, you would be reading, you know, a textbook that said- That begins, our ancestors, the Gauls, had blonde hair and blue eyes, right?

**John Plotz**

Is that how it begins? Yeah. Yeah, I think so. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Well, okay, Maurie, final turn to home. As you know, we have this thing on the podcast called Recallable Books. We'd like to close by basically asking if another book, which didn't come up today, would be of interest to you.

to listeners. So do you have something in mind?

**Maurice Samuels**

Yeah. I mean, I would tell people to read, well, I'm going to have two.

**John Plotz**

Yeah, you can have two.

**Maurice Samuels**

Okay. So one would be to read Dreyfus's own memoir, which is called *Five Years of My Life*, which is incredibly moving about his horrific

suffering on Devil's Island and how he was able to get through it, you know, and What you really find is that this was an incredibly he was, first of all, a deep thinker, but he was also an incredibly heroic person.

And that's one of the arguments I try to make in my book, too, that he's one of the real heroes of the affair. And I think that comes across. And then I think just the best literary evocation of the Dreyfus affair is, of course, Proust's long novel *In Search of Lost Time*. Um, some of you know the Dreyfus affair is a running thing through it, and um, it's. It's, uh, totally fascinating.

**John Plotz**

It is so point. Who is it, who says on his deathbed, who calls him back to tell him that he's secretly a supporter?

**Maurice Samuels**

The Prince de Guermant, right? Yeah, it turns out it's a great moment because both he and his wife turn out to be pro-Dreyfus, but they won't admit it.

**John Plotz**

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Fascinating. Okay, great. Well, I'll put a brief plug in for a book that we discussed on the podcast years ago by Sonali Thakkar called *The Reform of Race*, which is just a way of thinking about how concepts around defining antisemitism just after World War II were so crucial for post-colonial thinking about a lot of the categories we're talking about, actually.

Maurie, this is great. Thank you so much.

**Maurice Samuels**

Thank you, John. It was really fun. I'm glad we got to do it.

**John Plotz**

Yeah, me too. So, and thank you all for listening. Recall this book is the creation of John Plotz and Elizabeth Ferry. Sound editing is by

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