La honte de la France

by David Pryce-Jones

A review of Letters to Camondo by Edmund De Waal
LETTERS TO
CAMONDO
EDMUND DE WAAL
Author of THE HARE WITH AMBER EYES
The Camondo implicit in this book’s title is Moïse (1860–1935), and the artist and writer Edmund de Waal brings to life this long-forgotten man by the device of writing to him imaginary letters, discussing things great and small, in other words fate itself. Letters to Camondo is a requiem for the ways of the world, written just as poignantly as de Waal’s family memoir The Hare with Amber Eyes.

The first nine years of Moïse’s life were spent in Galata, a district of Constantinople that mostly belonged to Nissim Camondo, his father. At the time, reformers were destabilizing Ottoman Turkey by trying to impose a constitution on Sultan Abdul Hamid II, otherwise an absolute ruler. In 1869 the young Moïse and his brother, Nissim, escaped the political turmoil by settling into what they deemed was a trouble-free Paris, a city with the reputation of being “secular, republican, tolerant, civilised.”

“Nissim” is the Hebrew for miracle. He and his brother built imposing mansions side by side on the rue de Monceau, among neighbors like themselves, many of them Jewish intellectuals or bankers who had already established their social standing, for instance the three Reinach brothers, Joseph, Salomon, and Théodore, and Charles and Maurice Ephrussi (the latter two relations of de Waal and famously celebrated in his earlier book).

Whatever else the adult Moïse might be, he was seen as exotic, his Turkish background quite exceptional. Le Figaro made the point that he was a collector and also a sportsman with race horses, an unusual combination. There is no account of his fortune or his investments, but plainly he could do as he pleased. One among many splendid sepia photographs reproduced in this volume shows him sitting in a garden chair, smartly dressed and the very image of self-confidence and purpose. In 1891 he married Irène Cahen d’Anvers, who came from one of the most prominent Jewish families in France. He shot, he hunted and lost an eye in a riding accident, he was a persistent client of Jacques Seligmann, the art dealer, and he donated to the Musée des Arts Décoratifs a collection of fifty-five tie-pins made by the jewelry house Boucheron. De Waal lists Moïse’s membership in almost thirty institutions to do with the arts, all of which, as he says, were “in need of his name and a cheque.”
Here was exactly the kind of Jew caricatured by Edouard Drumont, the “hugely popular cheerleader of French anti-Semitism.” His two-volume *La France juive* (1886) is a journalistic misrepresentation of the Jews written with a malice that has been surpassed only by Josef Goebbels. The book went into two hundred editions. For Drumont, a Jew was always from somewhere else and could never really be French. The Reinachs came from Alsace and couldn’t speak proper French, he thought, while the Ephrussis were Russians on the move. Jews were only pretending to belong to the country where they lived. Assimilation was impossible. This rejection has influenced public opinion ever since and is responsible for the widespread assumption that Captain Alfred Dreyfus must be guilty of treason because he was Jewish; and then that the wartime trains to concentration camps were only deporting Jews to where they belonged; and contrary-wise, that Israel is not where they belong. “Who hunts, who should be hunted?” is de Waal’s point-blank question.

Moïse’s son, born in 1892, was named Nissim in honor of his grandfather, the original immigrant. At the fashionable Lycée Condorcet, the young Nissim was in a class with Léon Reinach, the son of Théodore, who had defended Dreyfus and led the counter-argument that Jews should assimilate wherever they lived. Moïse’s daughter, Béatrice, born in 1893, was to marry Léon, and they had two children born in the 1920s, Fanny and Bertrand.

Another revealing sepia photograph has Nissim the younger talking to his father, both of them side by side in garden chairs. The date is 1917; Nissim is twenty-four. Well built, conspicuously handsome, even if his expression is a little severe, he is in military uniform. After a spell at the front, he had volunteered to join an air squadron. De Waal quotes a letter in which Nissim describes getting into a plane as the pilot. This gives “the great impression of security.” He flew reconnaissance flights and combat missions and was mentioned five times in dispatches. Then he was shot down, buried with military honors in a German cemetery, and awarded a posthumous *Légion d’honneur*.

“This catastrophe has broken me and changed all my plans,” his father wrote. In defiance of the prejudice that Jews were only pretending loyalty, Moïse had given his son to France. He could do more. Gifted outright to the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Moïse’s house on the rue de Monceau became the Musée de Nissim de Camondo, Paris’s answer to the Frick in New York or the Wallace Collection in London.

De Waal’s letters form a sort of conducted tour of the house. Nothing has changed; it is as if Moïse were still there. There are five floors to explore and in the attics a huge, almost unmanageable archive. The room of Nissim, the heroic pilot, is a place for mourning. Though eye-catching objects in themselves, “Candelabra, vases, firedogs, pier glasses, tables, chairs and the guéridons” are the sort of ornaments that any rich man might have bought. Things French have pride of place. The seventeenth-century Savonnerie carpet in the grand salon, the pictures or lithographs by Chardin and Jean-Baptiste Huet, even the fashionable Carolus-Duran portrait, all testify to the superiority of French culture. So do the vitrines, each with six full shelves of Sèvres,
the superb Riesener commode, the David Roentgen hinged table, and the silver service made by Jacques-Nicolas Roettiers for Catherine the Great.

Dying in 1935, Moïse did not have to find out that the secular, republican, and tolerant France of his expectations would turn into a racist, fascist, and intolerant country under enemy occupation. The coffered ceiling in his house depicting the “Triumph of Civilization” was merely allegorical. One last photograph, dated 1942, has his granddaughter, the twenty-two-year-old Fanny, stylishly taking an immense jump at a horse show. Béatrice and her husband, Léon Reinach, and their children Fanny and Bertrand, were all deported and murdered at Auschwitz. Whatever the Camondos had given to France, nothing was given back, and today lots of little Drumonts are running riot in the streets. Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose, as they say over there.

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