

The Life of Irène Némirovsky by Olivier Philipponat and Patrick Lienhardt.

Chatto and Windus 2010.

It was the publication of *Suite Française* in English that brought Irène Némirovsky to the notice of the British literary public, and such was the response to this novel, as well as the author's circumstances when it was written and later fate that almost all of her other works have since been published in translation.

It would be dishonest to aver that Némirovsky's works have met with universal acclaim, but among those with whom she is popular every book contains fresh delights and indications of her great qualities as a writer: but that she should be controversial after her death is no surprise, for she was the same during her lifetime, and to the opinion of the critics has been added the confusion, and in some cases distaste, felt by Jews for one of their own whose writing about her, and their, people is critical to a point where it has been labelled anti-Semitic by some.

This new biography by two writers who have had unparalleled access to private papers, and who clearly admire and appreciate their subject, traces her life from birth in luxury in Kiev in 1903 to her murder by the Nazis in Auschwitz in 1942. As well as being a history of Némirovsky's own life this is also a history of the period in which she lived - the death throes of Tzarist Russia, the Communist revolution, the endemic anti-Semitism that drove her banker father to uproot the family to France, and then the Occupation by the Nazis of France which led to her deportation and murder.

But *The Life of Irène Némirovsky* is not just about the grand events behind her life it is a biography in the truest sense that considers its subject as a daughter, a friend, a wife and a mother, and above all as a writer whose growing impact came not without a great deal of effort on her part.

Reading the text, one understands the author's attitudes to her Jewish heritage and family – her despised mother was a notorious flirt and philanderer and seems to have resented Irène as a visible sign of her waning youth – and her father seems to have been somewhat distant and as a result was not particularly loved, favouring his money over his daughter. And towards the end of the book there is the story of the family's conversion to Christianity, an act which seems to have cost Némirovsky little but in the end availed her nothing.

The most touching part of the book comes towards the end, dealing with her love for and marriage to Michel Epstein, the birth of their daughters and their increasingly desperate attempts to save themselves as the tentacles of the Nazi killing machine and the French collaborators closed in.

This is an excellent work of biography, presenting a rich picture of its subject and her life, and is a must-read for anyone who has read and enjoyed any of her novels or novellas.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh