

# A LESSON FOR HUMANITY

The remarkable story of forger Adolfo Kaminsky encapsulates the Jewish experience in the 20th century **By Yaëlle Azagury**

**FORGERY OF** artworks is commonly carried out for financial gain, often exposed in the rarefied atmosphere of the art world, the suave antechambers of wealthy buyers, collectors and auction houses. Seldom, however, do we read about counterfeiting for survival.

Sarah Kaminsky's book, "Adolfo Kaminsky: a Forger's Life," narrates in forthright, conversational style the remarkable story of her father, a master forger with lofty ideals, whose vocation was sparked by dire necessity during the Nazi Occupation of France in WWII. He created false papers for the French Resistance, and later for a vast array of revolutionary national movements, such as the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN), and the South American revolutionary factions of the 1960s.

Kaminsky's life is novelistic material, encapsulating the Jewish experience in the 20th century, made of displacement, exile and deportation. Born in Buenos Aires in 1925 to Russian Jews who had met in Paris in 1916 after fleeing pogroms, he came to France at a young age with his family, who had decided to return to "the country of the rights of man" after securing Argentine nationality. Settling in 1938 in the town of Vire, in Normandy, to escape Paris's precarious atmosphere for foreign Jews, Adolfo was a pensive adolescent who, at age thirteen, dreamed of being an artist.

In the aftermath of the Great Depression, France was experiencing economic and political instability, so his parents suggested a

more useful trade. After finishing elementary school, he dabbled with printing, later becoming an apprentice dyer to a knowledgeable chemist who taught him science "the way you would pass on recipes." Enthralled by the subject and becoming expert in making indelible inks vanish, he was sought after to treat stained lace, communion gloves, and silk wedding dresses.

In 1943, after a brief but haunting imprisonment at the Drancy internment camp, the ill-omened waiting room to the German extermination camps outside of Paris, he was approached by a member of the French Resistance in order to make false documents to save Jews. Spanning three decades, his long career as a master forger in the shadows – he was known as "Monsieur Joseph" – had just begun.

Penned in unassuming, unembellished language, perhaps as discreet as Adolfo's self-effacing personality, and rendered in a smooth translation by Mike Mitchell of the original French work published in 2009, the book is more historical document than literary feat. Nevertheless, Sarah Kaminsky, an actress and scriptwriter, dons her father's persona seamlessly by transcribing Adolfo's account to her in his own voice, so the book reads like a memoir. It is a powerful homage, written with a casual, if poignant, simplicity, often masking heart-felt conundrums.

The first half of this account, which deals with his time in the Resistance, is the most engrossing. The reader learns about Adolfo

Kaminsky's technical prowess with inks ("There is no such thing [as indelible inks]. They can all be removed."), his sleepless nights, his all-consuming work ethic – he lost the sight of an eye as a result of working many hours on the microscope – or his self-denial in the service of humanist ideals: "Stay awake. For as long as possible. Fight against sleep. It's a simple calculation: in one hour, I can make thirty blank documents; if I sleep for an hour, thirty people will die..."

As Kaminsky becomes one of the greatest forgers of the 20th century, intriguing questions crop up along the way: What is an original? What is a fake? "Anything that's been conceived and made by one man can naturally be reproduced by another," professes Kaminsky, whose forgeries included the Swiss passport, then thought to be impossible to imitate.

There are suspenseful encounters with the French militia while transporting false papers for Jewish children before an announced raid, and incognito rendezvous in anonymous hotel rooms, as in a film noir. Unsavory characters menace Kaminsky. Aloïs Brunner is one, the sinister commander of Drancy who, in an instance of chilling comedy, spares a defiant Adolfo because of his name, the same as the Führer's. Though he never had direct dealings with him, Maurice Papon is another, a civil servant and collaborator with the Germans who sent hundreds of Bordeaux Jews to their death, and was later in charge of the Paris police in the 1960s, when Kaminsky was



Adolfo Kaminsky poses in front of a 'Lorillon' view camera at his home in Paris, in 2012

helping the Algerian FLN.

Kaminsky's personal account is key in supplying invaluable insight into the history of the Resistance. The underground organization, whose mystique conjures up stories of sabotaged trains and guerrilla warfare, has long remained a shadowy subject because of a lack of documentary evidence (resisters destroyed the paper trail; Adolfo himself literally swallows it in one scene).

Kaminsky unearths previously little-known facts such as the existence of different interconnected groups within the Resistance (communists, Jews, extreme-right French anti-Semites who wanted to clear France of the German invaders), often at odds over goals, methods and leadership. In France, the myth of a unified front against the Nazis was first punctured in 1969 with Marcel Ophüls's film "The Sorrow and the Pity," a seminal work which investigated French collaboration with the Nazis in the town of Clermont-Ferrand. It was followed by several other unyielding examinations

of Vichy France, culminating this year in Olivier Wieviorka's comprehensive and accessible "History of the French Resistance," which sheds light on the identity, allegiances, numbers, motivations and impact of the resisters. Kaminsky's story illuminates this complexity from a personal angle, as when he speaks of Goumard, a Jew-hating photo-engraver from the extreme right, and one of his masters, also a member of the Resistance.

Though sparked by extraordinary adversity, his skill as a counterfeiter became a willful political project after the war. Refusing payment for his services – he believed it would turn him into a mercenary at the mercy of his employer – he grew to be a humanist forger, a utopian outlaw, the Robin Hood of false papers, preparing passports and identity cards for the world's oppressed.

His commitments were not lacking in contradictions. He was a pacifist, but helped revolutionary struggles; he respected the law (even asking his daughter if there was a statute of limitation for his own activities),

but infringed it throughout his life. The second, somewhat repetitive half of the book is devoted to his work for revolutionary causes. He accumulated various movements of all sorts just as he collected lovers.

**A LUKEWARM** Zionist, he nonetheless provided forged documents to hundreds of orphaned and disenfranchised Jewish children, who survived the Holocaust, upon visiting a refugee camp in Germany, to facilitate their emigration to Mandate Palestine. He helped both the Haganah whose nonviolent means he upheld, and the Stern group whose aggressive methods he eschewed.

In an astounding story, he even agreed to manufacture a bomb to kill Ernest Bevin, the postwar British foreign minister, who opposed the withdrawal of British troops from Palestine. But ever averse to terrorism, he played an eleventh-hour *deus ex machina* – using putty instead of a plastic detonator – to corrupt the mechanism. Ultimately, he chose to remain in France, a secular democracy

## Books

whose flaws he had experienced firsthand.

Kaminsky's incongruities are the garb hiding his profound humanity. If the book lacks a full-fledged, more vivid portrait of him, it makes up for it by posing deep ethical and philosophical questions with a light touch, preoccupations which shaped his character. Is legality always legitimate? Is civic obedience an ill or an imperative when faced with iniquity? What is the difference between resistance and terrorism?

Take for instance the story of Madame Drawda, a Jewish widow with four children, French for generations, who declined the false papers handed to her by Kaminsky in 1943, in anticipation of her arrest the next day. She claimed she had done no wrong, and mindlessly trusted the authorities. Conversely, as voiced by Ernst Apenzeller, Adolfo's friend and more combative alter ego in this story, also in the Resistance, "If Jews had been persecuted since time immemorial, it was quite simply because they were the ideal victims because of their attitude of resignation, submission, and their aversion to combat." On the topic of patriotism, a widely diffused propaganda pamphlet for the Resistance framed these issues in a telling paradox: "To obey is to betray, to disobey is to serve."

There are other predicaments too, more inextricable than wartime ones, and ever relevant in our times, also burdened with similar issues. Take the problem of refugees. Kaminsky recounts his own scarring story when as a 5-year-old child, he and his family were expelled from Marseilles upon arrival from Argentina and forced to take refuge for two years in Turkey, in hopes of obtaining permits to immigrate to France. Adding to the Kafkaesque documentation saga, his young sister, born in Turkey, was refused both Argentinian and Turkish nationality, thereby putting her in legal limbo, unable to go anywhere. "It was then," he says, "that I really understood the significance of the word 'papers,' those indispensable documents that allow you to move legally from one state to another [...]. Without papers, one is condemned to immobility." Who are we without documentation? Is our identity to be conflated with our "papers"?

Often cogent, his beliefs border nonetheless on a vexing libertarianism, as when he observes, regarding the student unrest in

Mexico in 1968, which ended in a bloodbath carried out by the police, and the subsequent forced exodus of hundreds of people, "We were going to open wide the gates of Europe and freedom for them." Perhaps, in their radical quest for the free circulation of documents, the Snowdens and Assanges of our times are his spiritual heirs.

**HIS CONVICTIONS** are tinged with a kind of earnestness, as when he seeks refuge for a senior official of the FLN at the well-appointed apartment of his Jewish friend Philippe, who was in favor of Algeria remaining French (presumably, the two got along famously). But there is also a fundamental moral probity. Seeking to incite the French government to open negotiations with the FLN for Algerian independence, he had resolved to inundate France with forged banknotes to destabilize the economy, because, ever a pacifist, he considered it "an excellent way of applying pressure without getting caught up in a spiral of violence." The bills were never put into circulation thanks to the Evian agreements, which granted Algeria its independence, so he destroyed the forged money, much to the dismay of some of his co-workers whose greed had been aroused by the flawless 100-franc fakes.

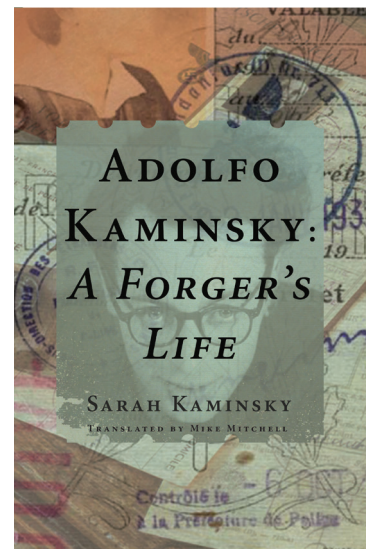
A well-known story in Plato's Republic known as the parable of the ring of Gyges is about a ring conferring unlimited powers on its wearer, the shepherd Gyges, making him invisible and hence impossible to apprehend. Given the choice, contends Plato's narrator, someone in his position will choose to act according to their own interests, to the detriment of others, and do evil.

Kaminsky's faultless forgeries are arguably his own ring of Gyges, granting him prodigious power while allowing him to remain unnoticed. Yet given the option to spread havoc thanks to his exceptional capacities, this tall, lanky man with a high forehead, an intense gaze and the beard of a prophet remained against all odds unblemished, and on the right side of history.

"I didn't change the world," he says humbly, "but the world did not change me."

It is surely a lesson for humanity. ■

*Yaëlle Azagury is a frequent contributor to The Report. Her reviews and essays have also appeared in Lilith, The New York Times Book Review and The Washington Post*



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