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Boris Schreiber. *Un silence d'environ une demi-heure*. Paris. Le Cherche Midi. 1996. 1028 pages. 179 F. ISBN 2-86274-450-6.

Regret was expressed in my summer 1992 review (see *WLT* 66:3, p. 480) of Boris Schreiber's novel *Le tournesol déchiré* that this author of some fifteen volumes had received so little critical attention. Although slow in coming, recognition has finally arrived, with the awarding of the 1996 Prix Renaudot for his massive autobiographical novel *Un silence d'environ une demi-heure*. A real "block-buster" of nearly 1,100 pages in 102 chapters, it continues and expands Schreiber's accounts of the tragic life of his Russian-Jewish family, suffering under communist and Nazi persecution and subsequently, as alien immigrants, experiencing prejudice and exclusion in their exile in Belgium and France.

The first chapters of *Un silence* cover, in greater detail, the same ground as *Le lait de la nuit* (1987) and *Le tournesol déchiré* (1991), on the boyhood of the narrator Boris, a young Russian-Jewish student in Paris. As in *Le tournesol*, the narrator presents himself as "multiple personality," frequently replacing *je* by *ils*. He employs the same device in *Un silence*, in which, from the first page, the young subject identifies himself as "Boris et moi." Boris is the only child of Genia, an adoring and tyrannical *mamouchka*, and of an indifferent father, Wladimir, "who reads the newspaper all during dinner." The family had fled Russia to Riga and Berlin (where Boris was born), to Antwerp and then to Paris, where they lived in extreme poverty in a fleabag hotel on the Left Bank.

Boris's student years in Paris were far from happy ones. Shunned as a Jew and a foreigner, only in the private Ecole Alsacienne did he find comrades who accepted him and shared his interest in literature. Even during the dangerous days of the Occupation, he remained obsessed with writing, working tirelessly on his "Diary," which he believed could "save him" and make him inaccessible "aux bombes et aux carcasses." It also provided him, of course, with much of the materiel utilized in *Un silence*. Passionately devoted to poetry, he frequently cites Rimbaud, "who cut the moorings," whereas he himself "strangled on the moorings after having cut them." He assures us that no one wanted to stay alive in this time of persecution and death as much as he did, for "tout doit couler vers l'énorme roman futur" – the "enormous novel" to which he devoted years of his career.

When the Schreiber family first arrived in Paris, the father, despite his professional background, had to earn a meager living as a laborer in the Halles. Within a few years, however, he prospered and was able to assure his wife and son a life of leisure. Boris never had to work and, fiercely urged on by his mother, was able to devote himself to literature. During the Occupation, which he describes in telling and occasionally humorous detail, the family fled to the Côte d'Azur to escape deportation and death in the concentration camps. On their return to Paris after the Liberation, Boris cultivated his literary contacts (including André Gide) and published his first book, *Le droit d'asile* (1958), while continuing to work on his "énorme roman futur," which he boasted would weigh more than "toute la Mémoire du Monde."

No question of the weight of *Un silence*. But not only the weight and the bulk of the volume pose problems for the reader, since no chapter headings, no table of contents, no index, no notes provide help in finding the way through the endless, teeming, often obscure labyrinth. Nevertheless, *Un silence* certainly repays the effort it demands. Boris Schreiber's experiences in his personal life embrace some of the most significant events of the period between the two world wars and beyond, from the Russian Revolution to the rise of Nazism, to the Holocaust and the flight of Jewish refugees. His massive autobiography, striking as it is as the deeply moving and emotional account of a tormented existence, also constitutes an authentic and unusual historical document.

John L. Brown
Washington, D.C.