

**Comments from Museum Director Dr. David G. Marwell and Deputy Director and
Exhibition Curator Ivy L. Barsky**

In the last year or so of her life, in the small village of Issy-l'Évêque, Irène Némirovsky could be seen writing furiously in her notebook. Fearing that her supply of paper and ink would not last — and that she was running out of time — Irène wrote in a tiny script, filling the large pages of this notebook with stringy filaments of text. Like tiny capillaries, the blue veins of ink scored the ivory pages, animating them with her imaginings. She did not finish what she had started. She stopped work on this, her last project of a prodigiously productive career, when she was arrested and taken to Auschwitz, where she perished. She left the notebook behind.

The story is well known now of how Denise, the elder daughter, discovered decades after her mother's death that the notebook was not her mother's diary, as she had always believed it to be, not the diary that she had been afraid to open. It was instead the manuscript for *Suite Française*.

Dr. Marwell: *When I saw this artifact, I was profoundly moved by it. Even in our contemporary world, with its unlimited supply of sensory opportunities, the experience of being in the presence of an original artifact, especially one as powerful as this, cannot be matched in any medium.*

I was moved by how this notebook communicated an entire story. I thought at that time, that this manuscript must be part of an exhibition at our Museum, but only if we could also exhibit the valise in which it had rested for more than fifty years before Denise opened and read it for the first time. Together, they would tell an impossibly poignant story about memory and forgetting, about mothers and daughters, about legacy and loss. I am thrilled to report that both objects will be in our exhibition.

When you are responsible, as we are, for relating the complex and difficult history that is the subject of our Museum, you learn over and over again that context is crucial. In our exhibition on Irène Némirovsky, we intend to tell the story of a real woman who lived in a particular time and place and who was confronted with unimaginable and unimagined challenges.

Ms. Barsky: *It is our privilege (granted us by IMEC and Denise Epstein) to “unpack”, as it were, the stunning evidence that remains of this life and present it to New York audiences—for the first time here—or anywhere.*

The monumental popularity of Suite Française and the intense interest in its author's life has provided us with what we in education call a teachable moment—an opportunity to reach out to those who are intrigued by Némirovsky, those who might not otherwise come through our doors. This is an opportunity to put a face and name together, and to tell the fascinating story of this family and literary life — albeit all-too-short.

The Museum is committed to engaging its visitors and promoting dialogue within its galleries, classrooms, and on its stage. This exhibit will spark many thought-provoking discussions as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, an authority on contemporary Jewish museums, told *The Forward*. “Holocaust museums are so often concerned with communicating a clear and unambiguous message,” she said. “By taking up the subject of Némirovsky, the Museum of Jewish Heritage is showing a willingness to lift things beyond the realm of black and white.”