Three Lives

New York City

Natalie Robins's article, "The Defiling of Writers" [Oct. 10], presents information of great importance. All the more distressing is her unwillingness to verify statements by acquaintances about the subjects of Federal Bureau of Investigation files. Permit us to present some facts concerning Gertrude Stein in France during the Nazi occupation.

Stein first met Bernard Fay, a French historian who specialized in American intellectual history, sometime late in 1924. By 1927, as his letters to her indicate, a warm friendship had developed. Fay had done research on the American Revolution and written biographies of Franklin and Washington, which he discussed with Stein. He lectured regularly at American universities. He also spoke and wrote about Stein, translated The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas into French, co-translated an abridged version of Stein's The Making of Americans and wrote the preface for the American edition of that work. Their interest in American history and literature provided the common ground for their friendship.

Fay came from a French family with Royalist and Catholic ties. Struck with infantile paralysis as a child, Fay was left with a perpetual limp. His combative nature, perhaps developed at this time, is apparent in his campaign for an appointment to the Collège de France, which he won against the economista-historian André Siegfried in 1932. His family's relationship with Pétain dated from World War I. When Pétain, after the armistice, offered Fay a ministry in his new administration, Fay refused, preferring a less political, more scholarly appointment. On August 6, 1940, Fay was made director of the Bibliothèque Nationale, replacing the dismissed Julien Cain, who was Jewish.

Fay was instrumental in obtaining extra food and gasoline rations for Stein and Toklas during the war. It was Fay, alerted by Ulla Dydo, who saved Stein's pictures from being removed from Paris in the last days of the occupation. Fay instigated—according to one source, with the help of Count Metternich—a bureaucratic battle between two German agencies in Paris that was not resolved by the time German troops began evacuating the city.

Fay was arrested in the Bibliothèque Nationale on September 19, 1944. He was tried as a collaborator and sentenced to hard labor for life—the sentence was later reduced to twenty years in prison. Stein (and, after Stein's death, Toklas) worked diligently to free Fay. What motivated them was personal loyalty to their friend. In April of 1952, with the help of friends, Fay managed to escape from prison, first to Spain and then to Fribourg, Switzerland. Because of her known sympathies, Toklas was thought to be involved in his escape. She herself was not directly questioned, but a number of her friends, including Marion Mill Preminger and Virginia Knopf, were called before the prefet of the Seine. In 1958 Fay was pardoned and allowed to return to France.

Kay Boyle's recollection, according to Robins, that "when the Germans entered Paris, Stein and Toklas went to the south of France," is contrary to fact. When the Germans invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, Stein and Toklas were in their rented house in the hamlet of Bilignin, in southeastern France (where they had spent the summer since late May or early June). They returned to Paris for thirty-six hours sometime in early September to collect clothing, documents, Picasso's portrait of Stein and Cézanne's portrait of Madame Cézanne, now in the Bührle collection in Zurich.

Stein and Toklas had first come to the Rhône valley in August 1924. They returned to Belley for the following summers. In 1929, they acquired a lease on the manor in Bilignin, near Belley. By the beginning of the war, therefore, they had become integrated into the tiny community and were no longer considered outsiders. Stein was known as a friend to the farmers and their families as well as the permanent summer residents. Stein lost the lease on the house in late 1942, when its owner, whose husband had been demobilized, sued to break the lease. Stein fought the case in court, but during a second court hearing she withdrew her protest when a house in the nearby town of Culoz became available. From February 1943 until mid-December 1944, when she returned to Paris, she lived in Culoz. During this period she and Toklas obtained emergency papers that would have permitted them to enter Switzerland and remain there in case of trouble.

How Stein and Toklas, Jews and Americans, survived in Nazi-occupied France is not fully known. It appears that local officials simply failed to report their names when asked to list foreigners in their region. Again, there can be no doubt that Fay helped to protect them. An individual who played an important role in the Maquis also reported to one writer that he and his group were aware of Stein and had plans to protect her should that become necessary.

During the war, Stein, like most people around Belley who had space, was ordered to billet both Italian and German soldiers. During these "occupations," Stein stayed clear of the soldiers while Toklas, who spoke little idiomatic French than she, and Marcel Rose, the housekeeper, took charge of the household.

Stein's political views are difficult to pin down. She thought of herself as a Republican. She disliked President Franklin Roosevelt's policies, although she was received by Eleanor Roosevelt during her American tour. At the beginning of the war, Stein, like many of the French, believed that Pétain would save France from devastation. In 1941, she contributed a piece to the Vichy-sponsored picture magazine Patrice. At this time, she also began to translate into English some of Pétain's speeches, although she reconsidered and abandoned the project before completing it.

Stein, who was of German-Jewish descent, disliked Germans even before World War I. Throughout the years when her home served as a meeting place for artists and writers, she kept her distance from the German modernists.

During the war, two small French magazines, Fontaine and Confluences, published translations of Stein's texts. Her French publisher in the war years was Editions Charlot in Algiers, directed by Max-Pol Fouche and Albert Camus. After the liberation, in the autumn of 1944, Stein's lecture "Langage et Littérature Américaine" was published in a special issue devoted to American writers of Marcel Duhamel's newly founded review, L'Ambassade. The editors of these publications were all anti-Nazi and anti-Vichy, and had Stein's conduct during the war been thought less than correct, it seems unlikely that they would have associated with her.

The most damaging information that Robins recounts is surely Kay Boyle's "I heard a rumor," with its reference to "a German Baron whom they knew" and to Goebbels. To the best of our knowledge, there is no "German Baron." The story that Boyle recounts, and which Robins does not verify, sounds like a fantasy of Sir Francis Rose, a painter, friend of Stein and Toklas, and well-known fabricator Rose was in England during the war. His worries about her safety appear as elaborately undocumented fantasies in his late autobiography Saying Life.

The pages of the F.B.I. files that Robins has brought to our attention clearly contain much misinformation. It is regrettable that her attempts to demonstrate this only add to the morass.

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Ulla Dydo