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Food, Culture, and Identity in Vittorini's Conversation in Sicily and Kofman's Rue Ordener, Rue Labat

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"Food, Culture, and Identity in Vittorini's *Conversation in Sicily* and Kofman's *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat*"
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Abstract: In her article "Food, Culture, and Identity in Vittorini's *Conversation in Sicily* and Kofman's *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat*" Brangwen J. Stone discusses Elio Vittorini's novel about the protagonist's journey to his Sicilian hometown in fascist Italy and Sarah Kofman's memoir about her childhood memories of hiding in Paris during World War II. The prevalence of food in *Conversations in Sicily* and *Rue Ordener* is not surprising given the extreme shortage of food during wartime, but food goes beyond simply illustrating the everyday in both texts. Stone explores how food and collective identity are linked in the texts and how it is connected to mother figures.

Brangwen J. STONE

Food, Culture, and Identity in Vittorini's *Conversations in Sicily* and Kofman's *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat*

In Elio Vittorini's novel *Conversation in Sicily* set in fascist Italy, the protagonist discusses the food of his childhood with his mother at great length over a plate of grilled herrings. In Sarah Kofman's memoir *Rue Ordener Rue Labat* the young Kofman first refuses to break the Jewish dietary laws embodied by her deported rabbi father, but then begins to love steak prepared for her by the French woman who hides her in wartime Paris. Evelyn J. Hinz writes that eating and drinking constitute "an elaborate and complex sign language that metonymically brackets and informs all aspects of discourse and human experience" (v). What people eat and drink in literary works can thus signify many different things when read in the specific cultural context of the text. Although Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin's dictum "Tell me what you eat, and I shall tell you what you are" oversimplifies the relationship between food and identity, there is an undeniable link between the two. Theorists such as Claude Fischler argue that food is central to identity because it crosses the border between inside and outside; we are literally what we eat; our bodies are food transformed into cell tissue (275-92). Thus what we eat — what we choose to become part of ourselves — is according to Jean-Paul Sartre indicative of how we define ourselves (783-84). Identities are constructed though differences with others through which collective self-worth and group solidarity are established (see, e.g., Hall). Food has traditionally been one of these sources of difference: it is a signifier of religion, gender, class, and nation among other things. Food can thus also lend itself to "reductive identity politics" often found, for instance, in the frequently nostalgic genre of the cookbook memoir (Bardenstein 160).

The prevalence of food in *Conversations in Sicily* and *Rue Ordener* is not surprising given the extreme shortage of food during wartime. Both authors focus on everyday life during the World War II and are thus describing eating and food. But food goes beyond simply illustrating the everyday in both texts. In *Conversation in Sicily* the protagonist, Silvestro, who is suffering from emotional Anesthesia, embarks on an impromptu trip from Northern Italy to his native Sicily and during the course of this journey his senses are reawakened. Stephen Spender describes the protagonist's trip as "the journey from doubt in humanity towards a realization of humanity" (9). Food and drink are central to this realization of humanity, and they first surface early on in the novel when they are included in a description of the emotional numbness that has been plaguing Silvestro: "I was calm … as if in all the years of my life I had never eaten bread, drunk wine or coffee, never been to bed with a woman, never had children" (12). The novel represents, as Joy Hambuechen Potter observes, a call to arms, "an exhortation against apathy and passivity in the face of Fascism (or any other historically reactionary force) expressed by the semi-autobiographical narrative of Silvestro's journey from the depths of despair back to the vitality and the passionate involvement with the world of his childhood" (51). Sarah Kofman's *Rue Ordener Rue Labat* focuses on her childhood experiences during World War II. Kofman's father, a rabbi, was arrested at the Kofman family home on Rue Ordener on 16 July 1942, and was taken, with the 13,000 other Jews also rounded up that day, to the Vélodrome d'Hiver before being transported first to Drancy and then to Auschwitz. He died in Auschwitz, allegedly buried alive by a butcher who later returned to Paris. After Sarah's father was deported, she was hidden with various families before she and her mother found refuge with a Gentile woman living on Rue Labat in Paris. Kofman developed a close attachment to this Gentile woman, resulting in a rupture between her and her mother that was never fully healed. In Kofman's memoir, food is a recurrent motif and is associated with cultural identity. In the following I explore images of food and eating in *Conversations in Sicily* and *Rue Ordener Rue Labat* by exploring how food and collective identity are linked in the text and discuss how food is connected to mother figures.

In *Conversation in Sicily* the link between food and collective identity becomes apparent early on, when the Sicilian cheese the protagonist eats on the ferry to Sicily triggers the rebirth of his numbed senses. In the cheese of his childhood Silvestro recognizes the "old tang of my mountains, and even their odours — herds of goats and wormwood — in that cheese" (17). The peppery cheese, Silvestro's Sicilian equivalent of Proust's tea-dipped *madeleines*, summons memories of his childhood home. While eating it Silvestro feels part of a timeless tradition and Sicily's long history is emphasized with

the adjectives "old" and "ancient" (17). Feeling "suddenly enthusiastic about something" after not caring about anything for a whole winter, Silvestro repeatedly says "There's no cheese like our own" to the "little Sicilians" who surround him on the third class deck (17). His words represent an attempt to be recognized as part of the collective, but his fellow passengers refuse to recognize him as one of them. Although the act of eating bread and cheese is associated with Sicily in Silvestro's mind, it renders him a foreigner in the eyes of the only person who responds to his statement: the "little Sicilian" assumes that he must be US-American because, as he states, Sicilians never eat in the morning. Although this culinary tradition must stem from the poverty endemic to Sicily, it is voiced as if it were an ethos. When Silvestro answers the peasant's question whether he is US-American in the affirmative saying he has been US-American for the last fifteen years, the implication is that Northern Italy is so different from Sicily that it might as well be the U.S. and that the narrator has become alienated from his Sicilian roots.

When Silvestro manages to start a conversation with the "little Sicilian" and shares his Sicilian heritage with him, it is through food. They discuss in great detail the various possible preparations for oranges common in Sicily, but there is still an abyss between them. Silvestro had enough food to eat even when he "was a Sicilian" and takes a long time to grasp that the workers were starving. The protagonist's comment that oranges "are nutritious" — made in response to the little Sicilian's complaint that it is all they have to eat — must seem mocking and callous to this man surviving on a food composed mainly of water, and, as it soon emerges, so desperately craving regular food that his image of paradise is a place where people can eat vast amounts of bread. Later, when Silvestro continues his journey by train, a fascist policeman aware that his vocation is particularly frowned on in Sicily, tries to reintegrate himself into the collective by insisting that the reluctant Silvestro partake of his omelet and bread. The reluctance of Silvestro to eat the policeman's food and the policeman's insistence that he does can be traced to the implication that there is peace and agreement between those who break bread together.

Food and cultural identity are also closely linked later in *Conversation in Sicily* when Silvestro arrives at his mother's house and shares a meal with her. Food and cultural identity are also closely linked later in *Conversations in Sicily* when Silvestro arrives at his mother's house and shares a meal with her. This is the most food saturated part of the novel: before, during, and after dinner there is a litany of the foods Silvestro ate as a child. When the protagonist arrives at his mother's house she has a herring on the grill and the scent of grilling herrings, like the cheese on the boat, awakens Silvestro's sensations: "I did not feel indifferent, I liked it, and I recognized what my meals used to taste like in my childhood" (45). The smell of the herring summons a vision of what his mother's face looked like when she was younger (47). Everything, including mother and herring, possesses a "two-fold reality: the memory and the present actuality" (47). The herring represents continuity with the past — herring was already a major component of Silvestro's grandfather's habits and Silvestro's mother ascribes her father's greatness entirely to herring (52). Silvestro's eating of herring also represents a communion with the past and his memories. Through food Silvestro and Concezione, Silvestro's mother "experience a certain national continuity" (Barthes, "Towards a Psychosociology" 24). Food permits Concezione "to insert [herself] daily into [her] own past and to believe in a certain culinary 'being'" (Barthes, "Towards a Psychosociology" 24). The food Concezione eats — especially the grilled herring — is integral to her sense of identity and is what distinguishes her and other Sicilians from Northerners. When Concezione describes the various methods which can be used to cook snails to Silvestro so that he can pass them on to his wife, he explains that his wife does not cook snails but generally cooks beef in broth with vegetables and macaroni. Despite attempting to make clear to his mother — who is disgusted at the thought of eating boiled beef — that "we were better off in North Italy, at least nowadays, at least in the cities, than in Sicily, and one ate fairly well on the whole," he also concedes the soup has no "special flavor" (51-52). When Silvestro turns Concezione's question whether he does not tire of eating the same thing every day back on her, she explains that eating herring everyday is different because it is tasty (51-52). The insipid and monotonous diet of northern Italy is contrasted with the flavorful food of Sicily — even the snails eaten by necessity when money was short were prepared in a variety of delicious ways by Concezione (50-51). In *Conversations in Sicily* food functions as a kind of reference to the local and specific. Although the Italian fascists may been creating a myth of a united country with a common culture, the

Sicilians are still eating the same food they have always eaten. The great regional variety within Sicily is also expressed through food and Concezione responds to each of the place names Silvestro mentions with a food-related observation: in Nicosia, for instance, they "make bread with the hazel-nuts on top" (66). When Concezione dismisses the northern Italian diet she is, it seems, implicitly also condemning fascism (in the novel fascism is associated with northern Italy) — a suspicion lent greater credence a page later when she explains that her adored father was a socialist. Similarly, it seems as if the narrator's intellectual stagnation in northern Italy is being linked to his monotonous bland diet.

Similarly, in *Rue Ordener* the important role that food plays in Jewish collective identity is a major theme. Claudia Roden explains that historically "the practical intricacies involved in keeping the laws of kashrut, the way they acted as barrier to free intermingling with non-Jews, fostered exclusiveness and separateness and ensured the perpetuation of an identity and a way of life" (17). The rituals of Kofman's childhood were an integral part of her life: her father was a rabbi who ritually slaughtered chickens for the Sabbath table of his parishioners in the family bathroom and the family "rigorously observed all the kosher prohibitions" (13). After Kofman's father was arrested and taken to Auschwitz, she and her siblings went into hiding with families living in the countryside and as they were living with non-Jewish families and needed to conceal their Jewish identity in order to avoid deportation they could no longer keep the laws of kashrut. While Kofman's siblings appear to have readily adapted to eating non-kosher "peasant food," she could not bring herself to break the dietary laws embodied by the father she had so recently lost and refused non-Kosher food, especially pork. Kofman interprets her refusal to eat pork, whose pretext was at the time obedience to her father's law, as an attempt to be returned to her mother (24). In order to ensure that that Kofman's aversion to pork does not reveal that she and her siblings are Jewish she is sent back to her mother in Paris. A series of further hiding places follow and in each place Kofman either refuses to eat completely, refuses to eat pork, or vomits so that she ends up back at her mother's. It is not entirely apparent from the narrative, but it seems that Kofman never actually tells her mother that she cannot bear to be apart from her: her body performs what cannot otherwise be said. Kofman's nausea is a gut reaction to the instability and horror of her situation as she is moved from hiding place to hiding place shortly after losing her father. Similarly, Silvestro's existential malaise at the beginning of *Conversations in Sicily* also accompanied by a lack of appetite suggesting a reaction to the political situation in Italy. Thus both protagonists' reactions to the circumstances created by war and politics are shown through their relationship to food.

Eventually, Kofman and her mother go into hiding in the home of a Gentile woman, who lives in Rue Labat. The Gentile woman takes on a mother role and asks to be called Mémé — which translates as Grandma but also sounds like a cross between Mére and Maman. Sarah's Jewish mother and the Gentile Mémé compete for Sarah's filial and cultural allegiance and the battle takes place in the kitchen. Kofman's confusion between mother and substitute mother and between Jewish identity and assimilation is portrayed through her relationship with food: initially Kofman still eats the kosher food cooked by her mother — who risks deportation and death to go out and seek ingredients for these meals (39) — but soon Mémé declares that Sarah is pale and "lymphatic" and must switch from the "unhealthy" kosher food she prepares. Kofman's mother, who is in the vulnerable position of relying on Mémé's good will to keep her and Sarah safe, is not in a position to resist Mémé's culinary "colonialization" of her daughter. At first Kofman throws up the non-kosher food Mémé serves her (42) and thus her body resists breaking with her Jewish identity "rejecting this foreign diet that was so unfamiliar to me and so unwelcome" (42). As Kathryn Robson notes, Kofman thus "locates her Jewish identity and her past in her body, using her body as a site of resistance into assimilation into a Gentile way of life" (615). Yet eventually Sarah's body begins to digest and even enjoy the food prepared by Mémé, who is an "an excellent cook" (42) and she does not think of her father at all anymore (57). While food is sacred for Kofman's mother, Mémé is constantly concerned about digestion and can "detect the tiniest quiver of discontent" and dines with the medical dictionary at her side (43). Kofman's descriptions of vomiting and defecating combined with the disgusting images of raw and undercooked meat seems to emphasize the profaning of the sacred taking place when eating is reduced from being an integral part of religious worship (as it is in Judaism) to solely being a bodily function. At the same time as Kofman is won over by French food she also becomes infatuated by Mémé. Kofman's obsession with Mémé borders on the sexual: Mémé's bare breasts fascinate her (55)

and sharing a bed with Mémé brings about "odd" sensations (67) and thus she experiences an almost complete "gentilezation."

It is not coincidental that the dish Kofman evokes as a symbol of her assimilation into French culture, her cooptation by Mémé, and her relinquishment of her Jewish past is steak cooked in butter with parsley (57). This dish contravenes two kosher laws: the separation of dairy and meat and the ban on blood. For meat to be kosher all traces of blood must be removed by washing and salting it and Kofman describes her mother following this procedure: "on the Rue Ordener my mother let pieces of salted beef drip in the kitchen for hours at a time and then boiled them" (42). Further, steak is part of French culinary habits and eating meat rare is a source of French collective identity and pride, which distinguishes the French from the English amongst others. Roland Barthes writes that steak is a "nostalgic and patriotic" food that anchors French collective identity: "steak is in France a basic element, nationalized even more than socialized" (*Mythologies* 63).

Despite hiding Kofman and her mother at considerable danger to herself, Mémé is openly anti-Semitic. She attempts deliberately to transform Kofman's cultural identity, feeding her self-hatred and stereotypes alongside pork, but also offering her the first insight into the philosophical world, which would later be Kofman's professional domain (47). While there are other signs of Kofman's alienation from her mother and her Jewish heritage — such as the fact she can no longer pronounce a single Yiddish word (57) — food is the most strongly emphasized one. Kofman's alienation from her mother and Judaism prove to be more or less permanent. After the liberation of Paris, Kofman's mother takes her to live in a hotel and Kofman refuses to eat. Now Mémé has become the mother to whom she attempts to be returned by starving herself. Once again the maneuver is effective, but not as effective as before as this time she only gets to return to her "mother" for one hour a day. Kofman's mother attempts to "renew [her] attachment to Judaism" (79) by sending her to a Jewish boarding school, but Kofman resists these attempts by refusing to honor the Sabbath to which food is integral: "to be defiant, I would come down for dinner on Friday evening in a smock" (9). Although Kofman does begin to practice Judaism again and respects the three yearly fasts, her return to her ancestral religion and culture is short-lived (80). The connection between mother and mother figure and food which is so evident in *Rue Ordener*, can also be seen in *Conversations in Sicily*. This connection has obvious biological and cultural origins: food and the mother are inextricably linked for the breastfed infant. Kofman alludes to this when she writes: "the bad breast in place of the good, the one utterly separate from the other, the one changing in to the other" (66). This reference to Melanie Klein's object-relations theory through the lens of which Joanne Faulkner reads *Rue Ordener Rue Labat* is made in an excursus on Hitchcock's *The Lady Vanishes*. It is allegorical for both Kofman's biological mother's replacement by Mémé, and the transformation of her biological mother from the kind woman, whom she cannot bear to be parted from, to a woman who beats her to make her stay with her.

Mother and food continue to be associated long after weaning in traditional patriarchal societies, as women are usually responsible for both food preparation and childrearing. Moreover, Anna Freud argues that although "food and the mother become separated for the conscious mind of all children from the second year onwards, the identity between the two images remains so far as the child's unconscious is concerned" (112). It is interesting, if slightly tangential, to note that Julia Kristeva argues in *Powers of Horror* that all food prohibitions ultimately stem from the original prohibition against the mother's body, which begins with weaning (105-06). This entwinement of food, horror, and the mother can be seen in *Rue Ordener* when Kofman's mother threatens her and her siblings with terrifying dolls when they refuse to eat (68). In *Rue Ordener* Kofman's desire to be returned to her mother is expressed through her refusal and expulsion of food and her initial rejection and then her gradual acceptance of Mémé as a mother figure figured through food. In the last few pages of her memoir Kofman reveals that food constitute an integral part of her problematic relationship with her mother during her adolescence. Eating the (presumably non-kosher) school lunches is a source of friction between Kofman and her mother and leads to "terrible scenes" during evening meals (83). Kofman often goes on hunger strikes and steals sugar and by the end of her baccalaureates Kofman "has lost twelve pounds and given up all forms of religious practice" (83). Jewish food, Jewish religion, and Jewish culture are so closely linked to her mother in Kofman's mind that rebellion against her mother entails rejecting all three.

As I discuss above, in *Conversations in Sicily* Silvestro recalls the past both through the taste and smell of the food his mother cooks in the present and through her food focused reflections on his childhood. Silvestro's mother "forever roasting herrings on the brazier" is for him: "redolent of time, of past humanity, of infancy and so on, of men of boys" (56). The conception of food and mother as one and the same is also apparent in Silvestro's and his brothers' childhood belief that their mother must give birth to the melons she seemed to summon out of thin air in the middle of winter and that led them to christen her "Mummy of the Melons" (60). The revelation, elsewhere in the novel, that the oldest children witnessed the birth of the youngest son implies that this fantasy was influenced by their knowledge of the mechanics of childbirth. In both *Conversations in Sicily* and *Rue Ordener* the mother figures suggest that the food associated with their cultural identity is the best and most healthy food. Concezione believes that it is eating herring that has kept her so healthy all these years and that it made her father a great man (52). To some extent she is making virtue of necessity: she could not afford to cook the beef broth she disparages even if she wanted to. Similarly, in *Rue Ordener* Mémé labels Jewish food unhealthy, and endeavors to "restore [Kofman's] health" with "raw horsemeat in broth" (42), while Kofman's biological mother believes that this non-kosher food is unhealthy.

Food is not only conspicuous in its presence but also in its absence in both texts. The extreme scarcity of food in wartime France and Italy is portrayed in both narratives. Just as food is part of collective identity, the absence of food is also associated with collective identity. In both texts the sociopolitical effects of war and politics become obvious through food. The contrast of the Sicilian diet of herrings and capsicums with the northern diet of meat broth and pasta made clear in the conversation between mother and son in *Conversations in Sicily* is not merely a regional contrast, but also a contrast of class. Silvestro endeavors to convince his mother that eating soup with meat in it every day is a sign of financial stability and steady employment and recalls a shortage of food during his illness, which rendered him unable to work, but this was evidently an anomaly. Indeed, his wife reacted with frustration when Silvestro expected her to apply the resourcefulness of poor rural Sicilians to urban northern Italy. There is an implication that the Sicilians can weather the food shortage better due to their long schooling in poverty. When Silvestro sends his northern Italian wife out to pick wild vegetables she collects flowers and pine branches and flings them on his bed. Her method of dealing with a lack of food and money is to convert books into food (91-92).

In *Conversations in Sicily* the imagined community of Sicilians which the "little Sicilian" evokes on the boat when he says that Sicilians never eat breakfast shares not only a common cultural background, but also a class identity and is defined as much by the shortage of food as by what they eat. The scarcity of food is first evoked in *Conversations in Sicily* through the workers on the boat, to whose plight Silvestro is oblivious in his enthusiasm about Sicilian cheese and bread (although they are described as "hungry" when they are first mentioned). They are literally forced to eat the fruit of their labor as they are being paid in oranges and cannot sell them given that the oranges are being boycotted in the rest of the world (23). The "little Sicilian"'s dream for a better life is expressed though food and his idea of "the kingdom of heaven on earth" encapsulated for him by the myth of "America," a place where everyone eats three times a day. To him, who is barely surviving on a diet composed entirely of oranges, the idea of ambrosia is bread with cheese, bread with meat, or bread with vegetables for every meal (21). Once Silvestro has boarded the train to continue his journey to his hometown, he overhears two fascist policemen discussing the final words the Sicilian shouted to him, cursing the oranges he could not sell. The fascist policemen are in agreement that "such fellows must always be arrested" and that "every starving man is dangerous" and is capable of anything, especially "perpetrating political crime" (24-25). As Willhelm Reich notes, hunger is one of the elements that can combine to form class consciousness and that will lead to a socialist revolution, but the communist party has traditionally treated it as though it were class consciousness (287-89). For the fascist government, the starving represented a danger of political unrest that is to be contained by arresting them rather than providing them with food. In the instance of the orange farmers, the government's politics are the direct cause of their starvation and here the rejection of fascist rhetoric is manifest.

The criticism of the sociopolitical situation continues in the scenes when Silvestro accompanies Concezione on her rounds as the local nurse. Most of the patients are impoverished and living in dire

conditions and Concezione asks each of them whether they have eaten as they cannot expect to recover without adequate nutrition. Yet each family assures Concezione that the patient has already eaten or is about to eat when in fact their diet is meager to none. One patient has been fed a roasted onion, another some chicory, and in a third family the dinner consists of snails. An international study from 1939 found that in the previous twelve years Italian had spent an average of 56% of their income on food, while workers on a "low income" spent up to 95% of their income on food (Sorcinelli 86) and this is borne out in Vittorino's novel. This scarcity of food in Sicily because of low wages is known and Silvestro's family often dined on snails and chicory when he was a child: Silvestro and his brothers were often so hungry that they caught and ate crickets. Yet Silvestro seems to have repressed the poverty and hunger of his childhood and only gradually remembers as his mother prompts him. And the fascist government — which made many promises to the working class during its rise to power — has clearly done nothing to alleviate the hunger Silvestro remembers from his childhood and has through its politics and warmongering worsened the situation. This is shown on a concrete level through the repercussions of the trade embargoes on those working in the Sicilian orange groves. The solutions the government does offer are insufficient: during the course of Concezione's rounds as a community nurse it becomes apparent that what is needed far more desperately than vaccines is food. The practice of doling out a plate of soup to school children is portrayed as a similarly inadequate solution to the food shortage plaguing the population, rather than sating the children, the soup has the opposite effect — as Silvestro portrays it ironically — making them instead so ravenous that they chew on chair legs and are ready to devour their parents (91). Hunger and illness are integral to Silvestro's musings on humankind and the political situation in which he concludes that the suffering and persecuted are more human than others (93-96). As Potter notes, "only when [Silvestro] can truly accept the existence of the poor and identity with them through his own remembered illness can his furies cease to be metaphysical and abstract" (59). A strong part of this identification with the poor is due to the fact that the abject misery of the ill in the hovels reminds him of own family's hunger and desperation during his illness. Yet the revelation of the protagonist's adult spell of hunger, and the gradual remembering of the shortage of food in his childhood, makes his obliviousness to the peasants' lack of food on the boat seem like a somewhat heavy-handed device to illustrate Silvestro's journey from political apathy to class consciousness.

In both texts the food of the poor is juxtaposed with that of the better off. In *Conversations in Sicily* Silvestro's bread and cheese is contrasted with the oranges of the starving workers, then the self-satisfied policeman's bread and omelet reminds of the meager repast of the peasant he recommends locked up for complaining about his fate. Later, the poor family's dinner of a pail of snails is contrasted with the cake and marsala Silvestro and his mother are offered by the rich widow they visit next. In *Rue Ordener* Kofman and her mother flee from their apartment in the middle of a meal of vegetable broth (30), and seek refuge at Mémé's in time for a dessert of "Floating Island" (32). Although this classic French sweet of poached meringues with custard would not be seen as an overly decadent dish in peacetime, the milk and eggs — which are its main ingredients — were in short supply during the war. There is an implied condemnation of those gorging themselves on food while others in their vicinity starve in both texts. In *Conversations in Sicily* Silvestro's initial lack of insight into the workers' hunger — as he not only devours his bread and cheese but also wants to talk about it — is portrayed as being callous. In *Rue Ordener* Kofman narrates of how, when she was younger, she gorged herself on milk and cookies at school — which her teacher allowed her in unlimited quantities because she knew her family was short of food — to the extent that she vomited. Similarly, there is a hint of disapproval when she writes "we had sweet white bread for breakfast every day of the occupation" (43). The abundance of food, sent from the country or procured on the black market, dished up by Mémé during the occupation seems to be haunted by the specter of starving in Auschwitz. It is not until after the Normandy invasion that Mémé and her charge are reduced to subsisting on the "soup kitchen, bowls of noodles and beans" that most of the rest of the population had been living for the rest of the war (43).

In conclusion, food is more than mere fuel for the body in both *Conversations in Sicily* and *Rue Ordener.* Food is narrated as the basis of collective identity and when it is shared it generates understanding and when it is not shared it is a source of friction. In *Rue Ordener* food illustrates how Kofman was torn between two mothers and two cultures as a child. Her vacillation between her Jewish

biological mother and her adoptive mother the Gentile Méme represent Kofman's vacillation between Jewish cultural identity and French cultural identity. In *Conversations in Sicily* food is a signifier of Sicilian collective identity, which is both a cultural and class identity. Through food and the shortage of food, Silvestro is jolted out of his emotional numbness and indifference and his belief in humanity is restored. The scarcity of food, portrayed through the meager diet of the peasants, also plays a vital role in the scathing critique of fascism and political apathy Vittorini narrates in his novel.

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