



VINTAGE

---

**DAVID GOLDER**  
**IRÈNE NÉMIROVSKY**

## **Contents**

Cover

About the Book

About the Author

Also by Irène Némirovsky

Title Page

Introduction

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Copyright

## About the Book

In 1929, 26-year-old Irène Némirovsky shot to fame in France with the publication of her second novel *David Golder*. At the time, only the most prescient would have predicted the events that led to her extraordinary final novel *Suite Française* and her death at Auschwitz. Yet the clues are there in this astonishingly mature story of an elderly Jewish businessman who has sold his soul.

Golder is a superb creation. Born into poverty on the Black Sea, he has clawed his way to fabulous wealth by speculating on gold and oil. When the novel opens, he is at work in his magnificent Parisian apartment while his wife and beloved daughter, Joy, spend his money at their villa in Biarritz. But Golder's security is fragile. For years he has defended his business interests from cut-throat competitors. Now his health is beginning to show the strain. As his body betrays him, so too do his wife and child, leaving him to decide which to pursue: revenge or altruism?

Available for the first time since 1930, *David Golder* is a page-turningly chilling and brilliant portrait of the frenzied capitalism of the 1920s and a universal parable about the mirage of wealth.

## About the Author

Irène Némirovsky was born in Kiev in 1903, the daughter of a successful Jewish banker. In 1918 her family fled the Russian Revolution for France where she became a bestselling novelist, author of *David Golder*, *Le Bal*, *The Courilof Affair*, *All Our Worldly Goods* and other works published in her lifetime or afterwards, such as *Suite Française* and *Fire in the Blood*.

Némirovsky was prevented from publishing when the Germans occupied France and moved with her husband and two small daughters from Paris to the safety of the small village of Issy-l'Evêque (in German occupied territory). She died in Auschwitz in 1942.

Sandra Smith is a fellow of Robinson College, Cambridge, and has translated ten of Irène Némirovsky's novels into English.

ALSO BY IRÈNE NÉMIROVSKY

*Suite Française*  
*Le Bal (including Snow in Autumn)*  
*The Courilof Affair*  
*Fire in the Blood*  
*All Our Worldly Goods*  
*The Dogs and the Wolves*  
*Jezebel*  
*The Wine of Solitude*  
*The Misunderstanding*

IRÈNE NÉMIROVSKY

# David Golder

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY  
Sandra Smith

WITH INTRODUCTION BY  
Patrick Marnham

VINTAGE BOOKS  
London

## Introduction

Irène Némirovsky died in Auschwitz in 1942. Despite her status in the 1930s as one of France's most popular novelists, her name had been largely forgotten until the recent discovery and posthumous publication of her unfinished masterpiece *Suite Française*. This fictional account of the fall of France in 1940 and the first years of the wartime German Occupation was published in Paris in 2004 to national acclaim, and subsequently became a worldwide bestseller. It has led to a new interest in the work of Némirovsky, a Russian émigré whose family had moved to France after the Revolution of 1917.

Irène Némirovsky had published thirteen successful novels in France before the Nazis introduced their wartime ban on Jewish authors, but it was with the second, *David Golder* (1929), that she really made her mark. Completed when she was only twenty-six, it was accepted by the leading house of Grasset and greatly impressed critics with its maturity. The central character was compared to Balzac's Père Goriot, the book was turned into a play and a film (starring Harry Baur), and an English translation appeared in Britain and America in 1930. The *New York Times* hailed Némirovsky as a successor to Dostoyevsky. Her career prospered and before long she was earning two or three times as much as her husband, who was a banker.

*David Golder* is the story of a powerful financier – brutal, solitary and ruthless – who has risen from poverty in Russia to a controlling position in the international oil business by sacrificing everything to the pursuit of wealth. Such brooding and malevolent figures recur in nineteenth- and



twentieth-century literature; they were portrayed by Zola and Trollope, and later by Graham Greene, among others. For these writers, the world of high finance threatened, conspired and devoured, and the character of David Golder is one of its most effective representatives. In Némirovsky's case, the portrait is the more convincing because it is executed from the inside, for this was to some extent her world.

Irène Némirovsky was born in Kiev in 1903. Her father, Léon - who was a self-made banker - was among the few Jews who were *persona grata* at the Imperial Court of St Petersburg. Irène was brought up speaking fluent French. With the outbreak of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, Léon Némirovsky was proscribed and the family had to go into hiding. They lost everything and fled disguised as peasants, first to Finland and Sweden, then to France - which they reached by sea after nearly losing their lives in a violent storm. In Paris, Léon managed to rebuild their fortunes by taking a job as manager in a branch of the bank he had once owned. Among other interests, Léon's bank - like Golder's finance house - speculated in oil fields. Irène would have witnessed at first hand the kind of ruthlessness necessary to survive in the business world. Furthermore, it is clear from Némirovsky's other fiction that she had seen for herself the wretched environment into which Golder was born. Kiev under the Tsars was a city of pogroms, and the Némirovsky's plight during the Revolution gave the fourteen-year-old Irène a taste of the same fear. It was this experience that enabled her to draw such a vivid picture of the extremes to which men like Golder could be driven in order to escape their roots.

In the opening chapter of the novel, Golder refuses to take pity on Marcus, his partner of twenty-six years. Their meeting is apparently devoted to the lifeless details of a financial negotiation. Almost immediately Némirovsky reveals that the former partners are in fact engaged in a

pitiless struggle for survival. 'I needed the money David [. . .] I . . . I'm really desperate for money,' Marcus explains, but Golder's answer remains 'No', the opening word of the book. There is pathos in Marcus's confession; money, blood, air, life, Marcus needs them as much as anyone else, and Golder, watching him suffocate, declines to help. Golder is the sort of man whose day is brightened when he sees a fellow human being in trouble. When Golder gets the better of a weaker opponent, he is dangerous. 'If you only knew how many he has ruined, driven to suicide or condemned to misery,' Gloria - Golder's wife - objects when her lover refers to Golder as 'a good man'.

Némirovsky describes Golder as 'an enormous man in his late sixties'. He has 'flabby arms and legs, piercing eyes the colour of water, thick white hair and a ravaged face so hard it looked as if it had been hewn from stone by a rough, clumsy hand.' As a young man, Golder had been a thin little Jew with red hair and pale eyes, holes in his shoes and empty pockets, hawking rags and scrap from a sack on his back. In the struggle for survival his senses have become fine-tuned to the presence or absence of money, he can sniff it out: "'He must be rolling in it again, the pig," thought Golder. (He knew how to recognise the inimitable, telling little tremor in a man's voice that gives away his emotion even if his words appear indifferent.)' Golder now lives in what seems to be an enviable world, a world of large apartments, spacious villas, sumptuous women and fast cars, where he is feared and obeyed. But it is an empty place. In this society of rootless exiles, money transcends all personal values and becomes the measure of everything - love, strength and self-esteem. The women in Golder's world are from the same mould. Idle and pampered, they are just as greedy as their husbands but less energetic. Golder's daughter, Joyce, is the only person he cares for, but even she avoids his company unless she is short of funds. There are two lyrical interludes in the story. Both take place in a

garden on a hot night; both involve intimacy between a man and a woman who trust each other enough to drop their guard; neither involves David Golder. The only intimacy he shares with his wife Gloria is the intimacy of murderous anger.

And yet the monster is human, a fact that emerges slowly as Némirovsky shows us Golder's black humour and his vulnerability. The humour starts with the preparations for the funeral of Golder's victim Marcus which, seen through Golder's eyes, are neither tragic nor pathetic, but almost hilarious. When Golder arrives to pay his last respects he finds that the widow is with the corpse; waiting nearby, he thinks he can hear the murmur of prayers, then realises that it is not the rabbi but the undertaker: Marcus's widow is objecting to the price of the coffin. There is a smell in the house that Golder does not recognise and he is uneasy - unsure whether it comes from the flowers or the corpse. Eventually, and with the greatest reluctance, he meets the widow, but instead of reproaching Golder for his inhumanity, she reveals that Marcus caused major inconvenience by shooting himself in a notorious brothel - 'as if going bankrupt weren't enough'. Golder remains unmoved. "She must be very rich," thought Golder, "the old crow. [. . .] He pictured his own wife quickly hiding her chequebook whenever he came into the room, as if it were a packet of love letters.' Golder is no respecter of persons, he is too observant to be duped; invited by Joyce to meet her new flame, Prince Alexis, who expects to be addressed as 'Your Imperial Highness', Golder takes one look at the youth and grunts, 'Where did that little gigolo come from?'

The humour is further emphasised in the character of Golder's friend Soifer, an 'old German Jew' who made a fortune, lost it and won it back, and who will die alone and be buried without a wreath by the family he hates and which hates him in its turn but to which he has nonetheless left all his money - thus fulfilling 'the incomprehensible

destiny of every good Jew on this earth'. Soifer, unlike Golder, is a type; we see him in silhouette, without any insight. He walks on tiptoe to save on shoe leather and complains that his wife has bought a new hat that looks like an upturned flowerpot when, at her age, she would have been better advised to buy a shroud. If Golder's doorbell rings in the middle of the night, he assumes that Soifer, having suffered an accident, has refused to pay the doctor so that he, Golder, is being dunned for the bill. Soifer grows indignant because the French police have told him to renew his identity card or face expulsion. Where would I go at my age, he asks. 'To Germany,' Golder suggests. 'Germany can go to hell!' Soifer replies. 'You know what happened to me before in Germany, when I had that trouble over providing them with war supplies.' Soifer invites Golder to join him in a kosher restaurant where they serve the best stuffed pike in Paris, and Golder tells him he's not eating meat or fish. 'No one's asking you to eat anything,' says the wealthy miser, 'just come and pay.' 'Go to hell,' says Golder. But they turn into the Rue des Rosiers, in the Jewish quarter, and breathe the odour of poverty - dust, fish and rotten straw. 'A dirty Jewish neighbourhood, isn't it?' says Soifer, affectionately. 'Does it remind you of anything?' 'Nothing good,' replies Golder, and later he sighs, 'It's a long road.' 'Yes,' agrees the millionaire Soifer, 'long, hard and pointless . . .' This is the world of Jewish exiles in 1920s Paris - unsentimental, bitter and black.

But it was not a Jewish world with which Némirovsky identified. As she began to gain confidence in France - and her family recovered some of its wealth - Jewishness became, in some ways, as distant to her as it was to her bourgeois Catholic neighbours in the fashionable quarters of Paris and Biarritz. In 1926 she married Michael Epstein, also an exile and also of Russian Jewish banking stock, but although they chose a religious ceremony in a Paris synagogue, their children were not brought up in the Jewish

faith. When Némirovsky arrived in Paris in 1919, she had two goals. The first was to establish herself as a French writer. The second was assimilation, the norm of that time for Jewish people of her class and education. In the aftermath of the Dreyfus Affair, when a French army officer was falsely accused and convicted of treason because he was Jewish, the defensive reflex of the French Jewish community was not to proclaim its difference; it was to insist that Jews were just as French as anyone else. 'L'Affaire', as the Dreyfus case was known, divided French society into those who were against Dreyfus and who instinctively defended military honour, and those (often members of the same family) who defended Dreyfus and attacked injustice. After a bitter twelve-year struggle, Dreyfus was acquitted and rehabilitated, and the process of Jewish assimilation could continue. This process was common across Europe. In Austria-Hungary, the novelist Joseph Roth believed that Jews could escape marginalisation by appealing to the protection of their sovereign, the Emperor, some going so far as to convert to Catholicism or Lutheran deism. In Germany, the family of the historian Fritz Stern converted to Lutheran Christianity; the Sterns worshipped on Sundays as did the Reform Jews, and the two congregations - Christian and Reform Jewish - said similar prayers and celebrated religious festivals such as Christmas and Hanukah together before decorated trees. The model of assimilation was the natural choice for the Némirovskys, who regarded it as a routine that had been interrupted by the Bolshevik Revolution. Irène Némirovsky had loved France since childhood; now she wanted to become entirely French, and her father's wealth and *savoir-faire* gave her the freedom to make that choice. If it entailed a partial repudiation of her public identity, she was prepared to do that, although her private sense of who she was remained unchanged.

In choosing to write a novel in which the central character, David Golder, was a hated Jewish financier, Irène Némirovsky was playing with fire. By 1929, the year of publication, she had lived in France quite long enough to know that anti-Semitism was still a powerful force in French politics and that it was entrenched in monarchist, patriotic and Catholic opinion. The Great War of 1914-18 had done something to heal the wounds left by the Dreyfus Affair; the French nation at war had been bound in *l'Union sacrée*, Jew and Christian, Catholic and republican, all against *les Boches*. 'L'Action Française', the newspaper of the monarchist and nationalist movement, which could normally be relied on to stand by its anti-Semitism, went out of its way after the War to praise the Jewish heroes who had fought for France. Hatred of the invader seemed for a time to have exhausted the national supply of fear and loathing. This new spirit of tolerance was put to the test when heavy post-War immigration coincided with a period of steeply rising unemployment. 720,000 Italians, mostly communists or anti-fascist activists, had settled in southern France by 1936, without attracting any criticism from the French right. But when, during the same period, Jewish immigration from Poland and Eastern Europe increased the size of the native community by about 100,000, the figures were wildly exaggerated in the anti-Semitic press. The popular success of *David Golder* delighted some French anti-Semites and alarmed some Jewish critics, concerned about stereotyping. The latter may well have felt justified in their alarm when the Stavisky affair provoked a political crisis in 1933. Serge Stavisky could have stepped straight out of the pages of *David Golder*. He was a real-life Jewish swindler who had been born in Kiev then taken French citizenship before setting out to make his fortune by issuing false bonds and bribing judges and politicians. When he was exposed, he committed suicide, having stolen over 250 million francs and ruined thousands of small investors. In the ensuing riots

of February 1934, fifteen people were killed in the streets of Paris, and the scandal caused the downfall of two successive Radical governments.

Later, Irène Némirovsky said that she would not have written *David Golder* in the same way after Hitler's rise to power. But she remained a high-spirited young woman, confident in her own judgement and determined to continue writing about what she knew. In pre-Second World War France, she was surrounded by anti-Semitism; it was in the air, and she responded by adopting its conventions and then breaking through the crust of prejudice to discover the real people imprisoned beneath. Golder is Jewish because Némirovsky was Jewish, but her choice of an unsympathetic Jewish character did not make Némirovsky anti-Semitic any more than Robert Louis Stevenson was anti-Scottish because he created the diabolical figure of Ebenezer in *Kidnapped*. Men like Golder existed, and no doubt still exist. They had come a very long way, just how long we discover in the novel's devastating climax. They had done it by themselves, trusting no one. Golder was a risk taker who lived by bluff and who could not afford to show any weakness. When he does reveal what he truly cares about, he gives his most dangerous enemy her chance, and he pays a heavy price. In showing us the vulnerability behind Golder's mask, the humanity of a powerful Jewish villain, Némirovsky was rewriting *The Merchant of Venice*, but in her version Portia speaks for Shylock. By undermining the assumptions of the anti-Semitic right, Némirovsky was playing a skilful double game that would have done nothing to decrease her sales, just as the manner of Golder's ultimate redemption would have done nothing to strengthen her readers' anti-Semitism.

Throughout the 1930s, Némirovsky followed French politics with an informed Parisian eye, using the decadence and corruption of the Third Republic as a theme for her later fiction. But she continued to trust in assimilation and in the

protection offered by the French nation, believing that she was safe in the country she loved – a country that had served as her family’s refuge, and had rewarded her talent with wealth and fame. The first sign of uneasiness came after the Munich Crisis of 1938. The two daughters of Némirovsky’s marriage to Michael Epstein were French by birth. Now, as rumours of war grew louder, Irène and her husband applied for French citizenship. Their application, though well-supported, received no response and so in 1939 – in a final commitment to assimilation – Irène and her children converted to Catholicism.

Before he was shot by a German firing squad in 1944, the historian and resister Marc Bloch wrote in his will, ‘Faced with death I declare that I was born Jewish, that it has never occurred to me to deny it . . . but that throughout my life I have felt myself to be above all and quite simply a Frenchman.’ This was the same identity claimed by Irène Némirovsky, and today the novel *David Golder* – seventy-seven years after it was first published – has become an historical document and a testament to the tragic error that led directly to its author’s death. Némirovsky never denied her Jewish origins. After the fall of France, she watched as her chosen refuge turned into a death trap. The Vichy regime passed a succession of anti-Semitic laws. Her husband lost his job. Her own novels were banned. She and her family left Paris for the supposed safety of the countryside, where they were all forced to wear the Yellow Star. And then the German authorities and the French government signed a joint agreement to round up and deport foreign Jews. During this period Némirovsky started working on *Suite Française* and wrote in her notebook, ‘Since [this country] rejects me let us watch it lose its honour and its life.’ But she also felt sorry for the German soldiers leaving her village for the Russian Front, and wrote, ‘I am resolved never again to hold rancour, however



justified, towards a group of people, whatever their race, religion, convictions, prejudices or errors.'

Irène Némirovsky <sup>1</sup> was arrested by French police on 13 July, 1942 and deported from France within four days of her arrest. One month later she was dead. Her husband, knowing nothing of her fate, struggled desperately to find her, believing that her arrest must have been a mistake. But the only error had been her own, the error of a misplaced trust in civilised standards and humanity, the same sense of humanity that Irène Némirovsky so skilfully deployed in defence of the central character in this book.

Patrick Marnham, December 2006

---

<sup>1</sup> For information about the life of Irène Némirovsky, I am grateful for the assistance of her daughter Madame Denise Epstein; to Olivier Philipponnat and Patrick Lienhardt, authors of a forthcoming biography, and to their publisher, Éditions Grasset. Other biographical sources include the preface to *Suite Française* (Éditions Denoel) by Myriam Anissimov and *Irène Némirovsky: Her Life and Works* by Jonathan Weiss (Stanford University Press, 2006).