RENÉ BLUM & THE BALLETS RUSSES

IN SEARCH OF A LOST LIFE

JUDITH CHAZIN-BENNAHUM

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I dedicate this book to Janet Rowson Davis, an English dance and television historian who introduced me to René Blum's important career. I would never have written about René Blum without Janet's kind suggestion years ago that I take over from her the hundreds of pages of research, including dozens of letters to libraries and institutions, reviews and programs of the Blum Ballets Russes and Ballets de Monte-Carlo performances, as well as all sorts of documents pertaining to Blum's literary and artistic career. Mysteries abound in his life, as World War II intervened and things disappeared with his violent death in the Holocaust. I hope that she takes pleasure in this biography, and that I have justified to some extent her boundless faith in me.

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NOTE ON TRANSLATION

All translations from the French are the author's own, except where otherwise noted.

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FOREWORD

René Blum! I have known the name since childhood. I remember a half-heard conversation between grown-ups connecting him with a ballet company then playing in London and with his brother Léon Blum, later to be the first Socialist premier of France. Even then I wondered what being the brother of a senior politician could possibly have to do with running a ballet company. What indeed? It had a profound effect on René's life.

That was in 1933, my first year at boarding school. For my half-term treat, I was taken to see that company at the now-demolished Alhambra Theatre in London. The program was *Les Sylphides*, *Choreartium*, and *Le Beau Danube*. I still remember the in-drawing of breath as the curtain went up on the moonlit magic of *Les Sylphides*. I remember somber glimpses of *Choreartium* (not at all realizing the new ground this ballet broke) and the lilting fun and gaiety of *Le Beau Danube*.

At the end of the performance the audience burst into rounds of applause and calls of approval. I recall baskets of fruit and flowers being banked up on the stage and armfuls of bouquets being presented to the dancers. Little did I realize at the time that I was attending the last night, on November 4, 1933, of the now famous, much extended first London season of the Blum-de Basil Ballets Russes de Monte-Carlo.

What an occasion to introduce a child to ballet! If she was not already a balletomane—the word had not then been coined—she would soon become one.

In actual fact, it was some six or so years before I had any proper chance of building on that first amazing encounter. I had left school; World War II had broken out in Europe and I had donned a WAAF uniform (Women's Auxiliary Air Force, ultimately absorbed into the Royal Air Force). For the next six years, I served in various locations all over England. Although it seemed that one was out in the wild, it was usually possible to get to the nearby towns and cities and their theatres.

During the war there was an enormous increase in activity in all the arts, among them ballet. This was kept alive and developed by companies such as Sadler's Wells (now Royal) Ballet, Ballet Rambert, Mona Inglesby's International

Ballet, and Ballet Jooss, then based in Dartington, Devon, in the forefront with other smaller evanescent groups. Somehow I managed to see a sufficient number of these companies to build up a foundation of knowledge.

Throughout six years of war, England was virtually cut off from ballet activities in other parts of the world. When peace came in 1945, there was an inundation of ballet news and views in newspapers, periodicals, books, dictionaries, and encyclopedias, which included the sad but not unexpected news of the death of René Blum, at the hands of the Nazis.

There were many tributes to him praising his good taste, his knowledge of music and musicians, his love of art and his insight into modern art, his love of books, and of course, his running of the Théâtre de Monte-Carlo and his founding and running of Les Ballets Russes de Monte-Carlo, but much of it needed to be substantiated. I set about trying to do just that, and found myself engaged in an ever-expanding correspondence with sources such as the theatre at Monte Carlo, the French Institute in London, Jewish organizations in Paris, the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, and occasionally ex-dancers from the company who had appeared under Blum's aegis at Monte Carlo, and so on. In due course, I delivered a paper on Blum at the 1988 conference of the Society of Dance History Scholars at Winston-Salem. This stimulated interest among the members and also my own desire to know more.

In continuing the research, it soon became evident that the project would need much more research in France and Monte Carlo by someone with time to visit these places and with a better knowledge of French than I have.

Over the years I contributed a series of articles on dance and ballet on British television to the scholarly magazine *Dance Chronicle* (New York) edited by George Dorris and Jack Anderson. It was Dorris who suggested that I approach Judith Chazin-Bennahum, a dancer, French scholar, and university professor in theatre and dance at the University of New Mexico, whom I had met briefly at Winston-Salem. In time, she agreed to take over my project.

For me, this has been a very happy association. Despite the geographic distance between us, she has always kept me in touch with her progress by phone, letters, and visits, telling me of her most recent discoveries, the people she met, the centers she visited. In no way would I have been able to do what she has done. I am so glad that her researches have come to fruition, that her book is now being published, and that the name of René Blum is finally established.

Janet Rowson Davis
Bournemouth, United Kingdom
2009

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My first thanks go to my husband David, my cherished collaborator in this seemingly vast memoir. He accompanied me in this quest to many locations—Paris many times, New York many times, Jerusalem to the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum, several times to London and Bournemouth, to conferences in Limerick and Banff, to Monte Carlo where we stayed close by in opalescent Beaulieu. Most importantly, he also researched and wrote the portions of this book dealing with politics and economics, and spent many long hours editing several versions of this manuscript. *Abrazos* to all our children and grandchildren, who happily stood by us during this book's gestation process.

Melinda Jordan and I have worked together on several other books; she helped me through the perplexing initial stages of shaping and transforming the manuscript into a cohesive oeuvre. Her unfailing eye and penchant for direct clarity led to its becoming a readable document. George Dorris, the former co-editor of *Dance Chronicle*, brought together Janet Rowson Davis and me. Throughout the text's development, he was a gentle mentor, privileging the subject under discussion, heightening its significant meanings, and eliminating extraneous material. My brother, Rabbi Joel Chazin, gave me courage all along, and cared so much about the outcome of this book. Roselyne Chenu, like a sister, is the author of a number of beautiful and provocative works, and was always ready to assist me with questions concerning research in Paris.

Very good friends, including Noel Pugach, generously helped answer puzzling Holocaust questions. Malka Sutin, who survived the Holocaust, nurtured and cheered me along. Lynn Garafola encouraged me to ponder issues surrounding the complex negotiations with personalities of Blum's time. Nancy King Zeckendorf put us in touch with Charles Gordon, an entrepreneur, and his talented wife, the ballerina Nadia Nerina. It was Charles, one balmy day in Beaulieu, who heard our story about Blum and advised that the title should be "In Search of René Blum." Judith Brin Ingber, Dawn Lille, Linda Tomko, and Janice Ross all felt a deep connection to this

subject and proposed useful and cogent ideas. Jacques Delacave indicated an important Le Touquet connection; Jeanine Belgodere aided me in getting through some of Proust's dense prose; Walter Putnam kindly suggested that I contact Anne-Sabine Nicolas, who decoded and translated dozens of Blum's hurried, at times scribbled, letters; Claude Conyers, formerly of Oxford University Press, was there to encourage me whenever I called on him. Eva Lipton and Katita Milazzo both agreed to look for information about Blum in the Holocaust archives on their visits to Germany. Karen Butler knew that Vuillard had painted Blum and kindly sent me information as well as a photo of the intriguing portrait. Ilan Greilsammer, author of a biography of Léon Blum, offered counsel about looking for René's lost manuscript and letters. Judith Berke, the poet and our cousin, cheered me on for the long haul. Amira Mayroz suggested some books on music that gave me insight into the musical culture of the 1930s. Sondra Lomax facilitated my liaison with a photo library in Texas. Laurent Hyafil, the son of Francine Hyafil, sent me his very touching, personal writings about growing up in post-Holocaust France; and Coralie Hyafil, Francine's granddaughter, spent many hours seeking documents in Parisian archives that might shed light on Blum's educational record. Jack Anderson, Elizabeth Souritz, and Kathrine Sorley Walker warmly offered to be consultants whenever possible.

The many hours of research in libraries across the world were aided and abetted by some of the most selfless and supportive people, the librarians. I am profoundly grateful to Romain Feist of the Paris Opéra archives, as he provided me with dozens of clippings and many other sources for the Blum book; Bénédicte Jarasse of the Paris Opéra library researched Blum's educational background; Cécile Coutin of the Bibliothèque Nationale has become a warm, amicable supporter in this endeavor. She led me to the Blum archives at the Arts du Spectacle and continually offered valuable advice; Valerie Gressel took time to show me how to navigate the Bibliothèque Nationale Mitterand collections; Charlotte Lubert as well as her colleague Véronique Fabré at the Archives of the Société des Bains de Mer in Monte Carlo kindly and continuously located letters, contracts, and photos germane to this project; Dominique Parcollet from the Centre d'Histoire de Sciences Po provided wonderful materials from the Léon Blum collection. Severin Hochberg and Paul Shapiro of the United States Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., helped me in my attempt to track down the autobiography of René Blum, which remains lost. Other librarians and curators who spent time amicably assisting me were Yehudit Shendar of Yad Vashem Museum in Jerusalem; Jane Pritchard and Revinder Chahal from the Victoria and Albert Theatre collection; Micah Hoggat at the Houghton Library and Harvard Theatre collection; my wonderful colleagues the late Monica Moseley, Pat Rader, Charles Perrier, Jan Schmidt, and Alice Standin at the

Jerome Robbins Dance Collection at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts; Eva Ayala Canseco and Pablo Berrocal at the Museo Soumaya; and Judith Hansen and Nina Kay Stephenson from the Fine Arts Library, and Nancy Pistorius from the Zimmerman Library at the University of New Mexico.

Also very sympathetic were the ballet dancers who gave their valuable time to be interviewed for this book—Christiane Algaroff, Frederick Franklin, Natasha Krassovska, George Zoritch, Leo Kersley, and Adda Pourmel. I found great new friends in the relatives of René Blum—Francine Hyafil, her son Laurent, Françoise Nordmann, Antoine and Chantal Malamoud, and Sophie Lavigne. Without their warmth and their hospitality over the years, I could not have delved into his world and oeuvre. I also owe a great deal to Joan Bybee for suggesting the remarkable Clay Beckner whose keen eye for detail and warm soul helped me to put the finishing touches on this manuscript. Coming into the home stretch, I am grateful for the staunch support of Mica Rosenberg, Rick Stinson, and Gabe Waters. Finally, I would like to say that I am enormously grateful to my editor at Oxford, Norm Hirschy, whose initial letters of encouragement gave me such hope. I relished the grace with which he chided and guided me through this process.

PORTRAITS OF NOTABLE PEOPLE IN THE MAKING OF THIS BIOGRAPHY

Francine Hyafil

We met on the Boulevard Montparnasse, near the Hotel Central on the Rue de Maine. She picked us up in her sporty French car to take us to her sunny and upscale apartment in Boulogne just outside Paris. As we drove, she immediately started criticizing Ilan Greilsammer, author of a biography of Léon Blum. She believed that he exaggerated Léon's attention to religion. She was right, although Léon never denied his Jewishness. Francine was warm, witty, and colorful, with a deep love for life and laughter. She spoke in clear punctuated phrases and was very definitive in her opinions. She always served us the most delectable dishes of her own making. We discovered later that she had written a diary of the war as a young woman. Her journals of earlier times described her family and the halcyon days holidaying in northern France. They became idealized in her memory. Her memories of the Occupation were not so jolly. They told a grim tale of her family's perilous journey to the Free Zone, and her father's desperate attempts to house and care for his family. Francine also brought to life the trials of her grandfather Lucien. She tells the stories with rich and vivid

Figure A.1
Snapshot of author with Francine Hyafil, great-niece of René Blum. Photo by David Bennahum.

details. It was her mother, Jacqueline Lancrey-Laval, who helped preserve the memories, writing for those interested in Léon and René about the facets of life so often ignored by biographers. Jacqueline additionally responded to Janet Rowson Davis's queries about the early life of René Blum.

Françoise Nordmann

Invited for tea with Françoise, "Oncle René's" niece, we spent lovely warm afternoons enjoying her sweet coffee cakes. Her quiet elegance and grace pervaded all our meetings. Her husband Roger has died since our initial meeting. At that first luncheon, he told us breathtaking stories about his escape from the Germans. Apparently, he was about to be arrested by the Nazis; in a fortuitous moment, as one of his guards looked away to light a cigarette, Roger ran and successfully hid from them. I naively asked why the authorities had wanted to arrest him. He said rather forcefully, "Because I was a Jew, that's it." Françoise and Roger married during the war, while René was interned at Compiègne, where he wrote them an endearing and heartfelt card of congratulations. Françoise and Roger lived on the Boulevard Vincent Auriol. It seemed no accident that they resided there as Auriol was a great friend and political advocate of Françoise's uncle, Léon Blum.

The huge piano in Françoise's living room, a small space filled with bookshelves, meant a great deal to her, as her father was a sophisticated musician, playing it all the time, as did their visitor, Uncle René Blum, who lived right below them in a smaller apartment on the rue de Tocqueville. Françoise recalled the gentleness and kindness of her uncle, who invited her to the ballet in Paris and in Monte Carlo as often as possible.

Antoine Malamoud

It was a pleasure to meet Antoine Malamoud, the great-great-grandson of Léon Blum, at one of the oldest restaurants in Paris, La Procope. He showed up with a helmet in hand, his motorcycle parked nearby. The restaurant, a snazzy place now, was formerly a café frequented by the most brilliant intellectuals of the Enlightenment, such as Voltaire. The rendezvous spoke to Antoine's innate sense of good taste and care for fine food and wine. I had the feeling at our first meeting that he was accustomed to supporting heavier players, writers who were recognized political historians working on biographies, for example, of Léon. He was charming and open, not fully cognizant of René's broad and rather brilliant accomplishments, and I sensed an ironic wit that erupted quickly when he was amused by something I said. Antoine's father was an Asian specialist; his mother, Cathérine, was a favorite daughter of the son of Robert (Léon's son) and Renée (his wife) Blum. Though Antoine's livelihood depends on his job with a pharmaceutical company, he's a fine writer who has contributed an introduction to Léon's *Derniers Mois*, and helped with other publications, and recently a film, about his great-great-grandfather. He was kind enough to send me copies of some of René's writings that appeared in publications similar to *Vogue* magazine. I suspect that they colored Antoine's opinion of René. We also shared some wonderful dinners with his lovely wife Chantal, an owner of a children's bookstore.

Sophie Lavigne

I received a telephone call out of the blue several years ago. Sophie Lavigne told me that she was the great-great-granddaughter of Marcel, René Blum's brother, born after Lucien the eldest. She explained that she had created a website for the Blum family, something I did not know about, and that she heard I was writing about René. Might I share some of the information I had discovered? It was a joy to hear her voice, and to know that there was someone else searching the past, rather than "moving on" or trying to

escape it. Sophie came to our little studio apartment in Paris with a bundle of postcards that her father had received from his mother Simone. They were all addressed to René Blum, and Sophie wanted me to be able to use them for my research. The three of us jumped into a cab to pick up Julien, her five-year-old son, and then went to the Montmartre cemetery where her grandparents were buried, and where there was a plaque dedicated to René Blum. We walked from Julien's school to the cemetery where so many distinguished figures are buried. Apparently, Sophie and Julien visit the cemetery rather often; many cats abide there and Julien loves to seek them out and to chase them. The plaque to René Blum was blackened and impossible to read, but Sophie was trying to arrange for a cleaning of the stones. What is so impressive about this young lady is her clarity, her brightness, and her intelligence. Her long journey back in time to discover her roots has been a bit arduous, but rewarding.

Christiane Algaroff

While working on the book in Paris, my husband and I lived in a little studio next door to Madame Algaroff, a former dancer with Les Ballets des Champs Élysées and the Nouveaux Ballets de Monte-Carlo. She married the well-known dancer Youli Algaroff, who studied with Kniaseff, danced as a soloist with the Lyons Opéra in 1944, and made his debut with Les Ballets de la Jeunesse (1946 and 1948–1949). As a freelance dancer, and principal soloist, he created roles in Charrat's *Jeu de Cartes* and Lifar's *Chota Roustaveli*. He later became a ballet producer. Christiane told stories about dancing in Lyons during the Occupation. In another apartment nearby lived a young man who would return home very late at night and barely communicate with Christiane and her roommate. He was suspected of being a Jew, and one day he disappeared and never returned. She thought he'd been taken to the nearby Fort Montluc where the Nazis were known to have tortured their victims. She also recalled dancing in a ballet in which Boris Kochno had been the dramaturge. While the dancers waited in the wings before the curtain went up, they always knew when Kochno in his dark suit would approach, as they smelled the perfume, Bandit de Piguet, that he used, and it was an unfailing clue for them. She said he was known as a rather dark character.

INTRODUCTION

René Blum's radiant life was lost in the Holocaust. From the moment he was arrested in Paris on December 12, 1941, his intimate possessions, letters, valuable artwork, and books fell into the abyss of war. Like many Holocaust victims in Europe, his resplendent reputation was ignored; it was as if in remembering him, too many were painfully reminded of the forces of evil that murdered him.

By the time René Blum became a celebrated impresario of theatre and ballet for the Théâtre de l'Opéra de Monte-Carlo, he was already an established editor, publisher, and literary critic. It remains a mystery why few contemporary dance historians have divulged the story of Blum's youthful and lifelong successes. A well-known man about Paris, his charm, wit, and close relationship to his brother, the brilliant Socialist politician Léon Blum, added a note of distinction and elegance to his reputation.

Filled with a burning desire to excel as a ballet producer, René Blum wrote to his paramour Josette France that he was unable to spend a weekend with her: "I am driven by a demonic force inside myself that pushes me to work endlessly and without respite."[1] This obsessive streak propelled Blum to seek and to achieve recognition in many areas of the arts, and after the tragic death of his friend Serge Diaghilev, to bring back to life the glorious Ballets Russes de Monte-Carlo.

Born to a prosperous Jewish merchant family, all five of the Blum brothers witnessed with awe and fear the Dreyfus affair. Their lives began during la Belle Époque in the late nineteenth century, a period that brought prosperity and stability to much of the Jewish community in France. The Blums thrived with the growth of urban industrialism, yet would be altered forever in the blistering atmosphere of a France torn asunder by hatred and anti-Semitic accusations of treason. Like bookends to René Blum's rich and productive life, the Dreyfus affair marked the beginning and the Holocaust the end. He was sixty-three years old when he was picked up by German

and French military police and taken to die in Auschwitz. But despite the final horror, the Blum brothers, especially Léon and René, succeeded in living rich, productive lives.

René was sixteen years old when the Dreyfus affair began, and as the affair played out from 1894 to 1906, René and Léon never seemed to fear for their own careers despite their tight connection to the literary and artistic salons of the Jewish community. As an outstanding young lawyer, Léon worked for the defense of Dreyfus and Zola. Denunciations against Jews for being foreigners and "un-French" certainly affected the Blums, whose parents were from German-speaking Alsace, yet they responded with a fierce nationalism, truly believing in the French ideals of Liberté, Égalité, and Fraternité.

Following in the footsteps of Léon, who served as an editor for the famous literary journal *Revue Blanche*,[2] René met the most famous artists and writers of his generation, such as Edouard Vuillard and Stéphane Mallarmé, by spending most of his time at the offices of the *Revue Blanche*. This initiation helped him to feel comfortable in the presence of artists, to understand and to promote their ideas.

René's lifelong, unyielding commitment to contemporary artists was recorded in a book of homages (*René Blum 1878–1942*) published soon after his death.[3] They remain testaments to his belief in the power of French culture. René produced the works of theatre writers such as Romain Coolus and Colette, as well as retaining designers, composers, and actors for his productions at theatres in Le Touquet, Pigalle, and Monte Carlo.

In his ten years as co-editor for the chic Parisian journal *Gil Blas*, Blum projected a singular personal warmth, engaging in conversations with his readership on such diverse issues as the critic's prejudices against what was considered popular performance, or the duty of the critic to explain to the public what he saw, and thus to stimulate discussion. In his criticisms, he wrote about the playwright's unique ability to connect with the audience and to convey direct, honest emotions without design or literary trappings that might interfere with their authenticity. He maintained that no matter the reputation or history of a particular theatre in Paris, such as the Odéon, it must belong to its "quartier" and present dramas that appealed to those who lived there; he believed that the best theatre should be rooted in communities.

His inherent good taste and intelligence, and important connections led him to arrange for the publication of Proust's first novels in the series *A la Recherche du Temps perdu*. Blum's exceptional sensitivity to Proust's unrecognized genius catapulted the solitary and eccentric author into fame, if not fortune. Other writers benefited as well. For example, Blum was not only the friend of the mercurial author Gabriele D'Annunzio; he was his collaborator in translating one of his most famous novels, *Forse che si, forse che no*.

In his prologue to one of the first Cubist exhibitions, Blum wrote about how important Duchamp, Archipenko, and others were to the strategies of the early moderns. On a more practical note, he created an early union of writers and artists that defended their basic interests, an effort that was truly original and professionally essential. Blum's articles on art and theatre remain sound and inspired aesthetic discussions, exploring the most basic issues confronting visual artists as well as dramatists.

Blum's sensitivity to popular culture was at the heart of his skills as a producer. He adored the diverse geographies of contemporary films as well as the popular culture of the circus. Along with his colleague Ricciotto Canudo, he became president of the Cine Club of France (1920), and a passionate proponent of film as an art form as well as a profitable industry, exploring the power of cinematic imagery. In Monte Carlo, he presented many films for his lyric drama program and arranged for an orchestra to accompany these visual spectacles. He was one of the first people to realize that film could also serve as a memory, especially for ballet, as dance is so ephemeral. He encouraged his choreographer Massine to film rehearsals of his works.

From the tender age of twenty, as part of his attraction to the everyday making of art, Blum promoted the sale of decorative art. French business seemed hostile to fresh forms in the arts and crafts, except for the work of a few audacious artists. Blum founded a publishing house, Les Éditions Choumine, where in a series of documentary works he introduced the artists who, twenty-two years later, were to ensure the success of the Paris Exposition of Decorative Arts in 1925. Blum was one of the architects of this exhibition, displaying his passion for fashion, crafts, and the publication of art books that he avidly collected and wrote about. Some of the era's most famous artists designed illustrations for classic and modern tales in these beautiful books.

Love of arts did not preclude love of country. In 1914, though already thirty-six years old, Blum enlisted in World War I, and was assigned as an interpreter to the English 19th Quartermaster Squadron (Equipages); he remained "under the colors" for the duration of the war. Not least among his accomplishments was the distinction of earning the Croix de Guerre for his courage under fire during the battle of the Somme. He knew of the paintings in the Amiens Cathedral and had the resolve to systematically remove a number of magnificent artworks under intense enemy fire. He also volunteered to recover other works of art lost in the military zone.

After the war, he took over the management of the publishing house Librairie de France, where he helped issue a series of works devoted to great writers such as Flaubert, Verlaine, and Daudet, with illustrations by prominent contemporary artists. He also published encyclopedias, most notably a sports encyclopedia in two volumes, which represented the most outstanding and complete work on sports of the time.

Blum made his most inventive and valued contributions as a purveyor of and publicist for original and classical theatre and dance. In Monte Carlo he staged 140 different productions, including 40 premiere productions of English dramas such as St. John Ervine's *Anthony and Anna*, which was first produced in Monte Carlo and had a run of 1,200 performances in London. He knew that for years George Bernard Shaw had been unappreciated by French audiences, but decided that the luminous Russian actress Ludmilla Pitoëff would make a brilliant Saint Joan; Shaw's *Sainte Jeanne* received superior reviews in Monte Carlo, and afterwards it took Paris by storm. He recognized Marcel Pagnol's exceptional talent and presented *Jazz*, Pagnol's first play to become an immense success.

One of Blum's striking attributes was his ability to edit and rework plays and operettas in performance. He knew how best to present the scenarios, with a careful eye to his audience and to the theatre where they were performed, adding musical scores that were appropriate for the dramatic intention. And he was a superb writer, enhancing or taking out dialogue to insure a play's success, yet always sensitive to issues of copyright and the author's wishes. Several productions carried his pseudonym René Bergeret. He co-wrote under his own name one or two plays, most notably *Les Amours du poète* with Georges Delaquys. The play was about the great poet Heinrich Heine, who fell madly in love with his cousin Amélie. The reviews in Monte Carlo and Paris spoke glowingly of the thoughtful way Blum integrated Schumann's Dichterliebe music, a charming choreographic pantomime by George Balanchine, Heine's exquisite poetry, and his own dialogue. Unfortunately, Blum's crushing schedule made it impossible for him to create more of his own original works.

In the history of dance, Blum is revered for having saved the Ballets Russes from probable extinction after the death of Diaghilev in 1929. A close colleague and "student" of Diaghilev's during the many years the Ballets Russes played in Monte Carlo, Blum realized that the ballet had to go on despite the death of its founder. He quickly began to reassemble the important artists in the company, rehiring in 1932 Serge Grigoriev, who possessed a keen knowledge of repertoire, as ballet master. Blum also brought in George Balanchine as master choreographer and teacher, Léonide Massine as a dancer and choreographer, Bronislava Nijinska and Boris Kochno as artistic advisors, among others. He made the unfortunate choice of Colonel de Basil as his co-director, soon regretting that decision as the Colonel proved an unreliable partner. He was unable to disengage from the Colonel until 1936.

Blum nurtured and encouraged the making of many important works in the ballet repertoire, drawing on world famous painters, designers, and composers. The debut performances of his company included Balanchine's exciting *Cotillon* and *La Concurrence*, and soon after, Massine's unique symphonic innovations *Les Présages, Choreartium*, and *Seventh Symphony*.

Several years later, Blum formed his own Ballets de Monte-Carlo, and hired Michel Fokine as the director of ballet. During that time Fokine created *L'Épreuve d'Amour, Les Éléments*, and *Don Juan*. Over the years, Blum's companies toured London, Paris, and many European cities, and traveled to South Africa as well. Most importantly, they experienced huge success across America, so that when it became clear that Europe was to fight another war, Blum sold his company to the American impresarios Serge Denham and Julius Fleischmann. Retaining shares in the company, Blum traveled with them, watching rehearsals and performances until 1940 when the war broke out and he chose to return to his family in Paris. There he began a film about Molière, only to find himself trapped by the Vichy government, unable to work as a result of the anti-Jewish racial laws during the German Occupation.

Perhaps more precious than any other quality, Blum had a gift for loyalty and friendship. The homages written for Blum after his death included many compliments, as well as long lists of his accomplishments. But foremost among the encomia were descriptions of his warmth, gallant generosity, and lack of self-interest. Georges Huisman, state councilor and former general director of fine arts for the French government, recalled that in 1936, at the height of Blum's career, he asked Blum to run two of the most important theatres in Paris: the Opéra and the Opéra Comique. Blum declined, saying that as long as his brother was prime minister, he must remain in Monte Carlo, so as to avoid any suggestion of family privilege.

In another essay, the astonishing artist Jean Cocteau paid tribute to Blum's unique qualities of kindness and devotion. Cocteau wrote about Blum's "grace and ardor," more suited to someone who lived in a fantasy world than to someone preoccupied with the most practical details of life. Blum and Cocteau would take "interminable" nocturnal walks through Paris, in conversation until daylight came. On these long wanderings, Cocteau discovered Blum's generosity, and his ease in accepting others' secrets and confessions. Blum helped Cocteau "to forget the cold and egotistical world." He found comfort in Blum's long perorations on art.[4] Others as well noted Blum's gentle soul and empathy as something more than vague sentiments; Romain Coolus ascribed to Blum a "perspicacious intuition that women possess in the highest degree, a tenderness that enveloped all of René Blum's being, something of the grace and delicacy of women."[5]

Thus, Blum not only lived a life in the service of art and beauty, but also gave many fellow artists courage and modeled an exalted view of human relations. How tragic that we lost him to the Holocaust along with his autobiography *Souvenir sur la Danse*, a detailed history of his contributions to ballet history, and meditations on his life and art. I hope in this book to bring back to life this marvelous man whom the world should remember and know better.

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CHAPTER 1

Childhood and Youth

The Formation of an Intellectual and Aesthete

René Möise Blum was born in Paris, the city of light, on March 13, 1878, the youngest of five boys. Above a bustling, heavily populated mercantile street in an apartment at 151 rue Saint-Denis, his parents, Marie-Adèle-Alice Picart and Auguste Blum, raised their sons in a loving and inspiring household. Historian William Logue characterized Saint-Denis as a "long depressing, urban street where small merchants lived frugally above their businesses. . . . It was a place more populated than popular, and haunted by memories of worker rebellions."[1]

Auguste had grown up in Westhoffen, a city in Alsace southwest of Strasbourg, but moved to Paris in 1848 in search of better opportunities.

At first employed by Moïse Léon, Auguste soon opened his own wholesale silk and ribbon store. He had several business partners; when they retired, he bought out their shares and become proprietor along with his brothers Henri and Émile. According to historian Serge Berstein, as the market for women's clothes grew in the late nineteenth century, "A brisk business for Blum Frères developed in rubans, soieries, velours, tulle, dentelles."[2] Taking advantage of the hearty growth in industrial Paris, Blum Frères managed to stay in business despite changes in women's fashions. However, when Auguste died in 1921, the company was already failing, and the 1929 market crash dealt the final blow to the family's finances.[3]

The original store stood in the old neighborhood of Les Halles, the famous food market where dozens of peddlers filled the streets. The Paris of the Third Republic, into which the Blum brothers were born, was undergoing enormous changes that would create the modern city of Paris. After 1880, gas lights, elevators, steam heat, toilets, and baths became the norm in new apartment buildings, soon to be followed by electric lighting and an

Figure 1.1
Auguste Blum's home in Westhoffen, Alsace-Lorraine. Courtesy of Centre d'histoire de SciencesPo.

underground metro system. The French celebrated this new metropolis in the expositions of 1878, 1889, and 1900, the last of which attracted 50,860,801 visitors.[4] British historian Alistair Horne noted that this figure equaled more than the whole population of France. The world came to Paris because, as Colin Jones, also a British historian, said, "The expositions celebrated the cult of technology and industrial production."[5]

Admiration for the machine age was not universal; some writers and artists questioned the values that had destroyed the old Paris in order to create the new, and decried the deprivation suffered by the workers in the suburbs. The central part of the city, with its magnificent department stores, parks and promenades, and, above all, the Eiffel Tower (erected in 1889 to celebrate the centenary of the French Revolution), could not hide the poverty of the enlarging *banlieues*, workers' suburbs that surrounded the city. Jones commented that Paris "retained its ability to defy interpretation and to divide opinion. Dispute over the meanings of the city had become a debate over the nature of modernity, a debate in which non-Parisians the world over were free to participate. . . . The period of La Belle Époque was thus also that of the fin de siécle."[6]

Social issues continued to plague both urban and rural areas. The esteemed English historian Alfred Cobban wrote that "France evidently remained under the Republic what it had been under the Monarchy and the

Figure 1.2
Portrait of Auguste Blum. Courtesy of Francine Hyafil.

Empire, a socially intense and conservative country."[7] Political tensions swirled beneath the modernist façade of the Third Republic, whose constitution had given the vote to all adult males. "From the ashes of the Commune," on the left, a new Socialist movement developed.[8] The first Labor Day celebration on May 1, 1890, attracted some 100,000 workers. By 1895, the Confédération Générale du Travail (the CGT) had begun campaigning for worker rights such as the eight-hour workday. The left grew increasingly militant as anarchists turned to violence.

René Blum's eldest brother, Lucien, was born in 1870, Léon in 1872, Marcel in 1874, and Georges in 1876. Eventually, Lucien, Marcel, and Georges worked in the office of Blum Frères, but René and Léon had other dreams.

A family friend, Thadée Natanson, described Auguste as a shrewd, upright Jewish merchant who cared deeply for his business. Modest and known as a lover of nature, especially flowers, Auguste had a conciliatory disposition; kind and diplomatic, he was particularly attracted to clear

Figure 1.3
Portrait of Blum brothers. First row from left: Georges, René, and Marcel; in back: Lucien and Léon. Courtesy of Centre d'histoire de SciencesPo.

thinking, to facts and a precise way of looking at things. Although financially acquisitive, he was discreetly and anonymously generous and charitable. He sought constant instruction and learning; quite gifted in languages, he knew Hebrew, German, French, and understood English.[9] René seems to have inherited many of Auguste's talents and his equitable disposition.

In 1869, Auguste married Picart, whose family was originally from Alsace, and whose mother, Henriette, owned a bookshop on the Place Dauphine, not far from the Palais de Justice, where lawyers and students of law brought their texts. Widowed at a young age, Henriette had a strong character and a passion for poetry and literature, especially the writers Victor Hugo and George Sand. She had republican sentiments, hostile to the regime of Napoléon III, that led her to sympathize with the Commune and with the hope for a just society. Therefore, having inherited these values from her mother, early on Marie-Adéle taught her sons the humanistic and Jewish values of charity and justice. Léon later told a story about his mother that echoed these precepts:

> She was the most just being I have ever known. I have never encountered anyone else with such an intensity of scruple. She carried the sentiment of justice to melancholy extremes. . . . Have I ever told you the story of the apples? I was raised with a brother a little older than myself. When my mother gave us apples for a snack, she did not give each of us a whole apple. She cut two apples in half and gave each of us one half from each apple. It was only in this way that the division seemed equal to her.[10]

René's mother and grandmother reflected the new voice of French feminism as articulated by Marguerite Durand, who established the journal *La Fronde* in 1897. This was a period in which women once again strove for the right to vote and the right to divorce. Under the façade of la Belle Époque, politics, class, and gender divided society, and René's grandmother and mother exemplified the new woman who espoused workers' and feminists' causes.[11]

French middle-class Jews of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries often did not observe restrictive culinary habits, nor did they necessarily hold to the Sabbath. They were eager to be French, to work when it was necessary, and not to structure their lives with religious obligations. But René's mother affiliated with orthodoxy and kept a kosher home, in part as the neighborhood stores sold kosher products. Lucien wrote in his diary, "When I think about my mother's piety as a Jewish woman, I can only imagine that she was the epitome of what one means when one uses the word piety in any religious sense."[12] He added that when his mother wished for something, she always added, "If it pleases God," as a token of her faith.[13] As the family professed a deep and abiding dedication to equality of opportunity, regardless of birthright, it is no wonder that Léon became a Socialist.

René's niece, Françoise Nordmann, and great-niece, Francine Hyafil, recalled that Marie-Adèle Picart also emphasized Friday evening meals as important family gatherings. She knew the Sabbath prayers, and tried to imbue her children with a sense of Jewish culture. All five boys were trained

Figure 1.4
Portrait of René's parents—Auguste Blum and Marie-Adèle Picart. Courtesy of Centre d'histoire de SciencesPo.

in Hebrew for their bar mitzvahs, and the holidays of Pesach (Passover), Rosh Hashanah, and Yom Kippur were part of their parents' ceremonial calendar. Yet none of the young men professed to be religious; they all sought an assimilated life, despite their strong "esprit de famille" and their close ties to other Jews. Their mother welcomed their friends and was considered a warm conversationalist. In a letter to his mother in 1890, the