



Poster, *Journée Nationale des Paralysés et Infirmes Civils*, 8 June 1952  
Cary Graphic Arts Collection, Rochester Institute of Technology.



Poster, *Journée Nationale des Paralysés et Infirmes Civils*, 26 June 1955  
Cary Graphic Arts Collection, Rochester Institute of Technology.

## *Notes on Sources*

# The Journée Nationale des Paralysés and the French Poster Child (or Why I Started Doing Research on Ebay)

REBECCA SCALES

These two posters, created by the Association des Paralysés de France for the Journée Nationale des Paralysés et Infirmes Civils, feature three compelling images of disabled children. In the first poster, we see two young girls, perhaps five or six years old. One wears orthopedic shoes and a leg brace. Each girl balances on a cane while raising her hand in the air, as if in a gesture of victory. “You who walk, help us,” the poster implores. In the second, a young girl sits with her canes crossed over her legs, looking toward the camera with a shy smile on her face. Flanked by the bleu, blanc, rouge of the French flag, she reminds viewers that contributing to the rehabilitation of children with polio on the Journée Nationale is not only a gesture of solidarity, but a national duty.

When I first began researching polio in France, I expected to find images like these everywhere. Instead, I was regularly met with the somewhat baffling question “La polio? C’était un problème ici?” As the child of American parents born in the late 1940s, I grew up hearing stories about polio: my father standing in line to receive the vaccine; my mother’s cousin Jim walking with braces. When visiting my grandmother in rural Alabama, we often drove by the highway exit for Warm Springs, Georgia, where the former U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt purchased a hydrotherapy facility to treat his own polio, later turning it into a rehabilitation center for patients from across the United States.

To finance Warm Springs, Roosevelt and Basil O’Connor created the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis (NFIP), colloquially known as the March of Dimes. From the mid-1930s onward, the March of Dimes used “poster children” to fundraise for polio treatment and scientific research leading to a polio vaccine.<sup>1</sup> By mobilizing Americans to donate ten-cent coins to “cure” polio, the March of Dimes became a model

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Longmore, *Telethons: Spectacle, Disability, and the Business of Charity* (Oxford, 2016), 13.

for American medical philanthropy.<sup>2</sup> However problematic the use of these “poster children” may appear to us today, they cemented polio in Americans’ collective historical memory. Were there poster children in France, I wondered? And if so, what might those images tell us about how French people imagined polio and its aftermath?

Polio outbreaks in France never reached the size and scale of those in the United States, but between 1946 and 1959, the state counted 1500 to 4000 cases annually. These statistics do not capture the full epidemiological picture, however, because polio was often misdiagnosed and underreported. Nor do they account for the substantial number of polio survivors who contracted the disease before and during the Second World War, but who rarely received rehabilitation.<sup>3</sup> Although the French state created a vast bureaucracy in the 1920s to deliver medical care, rehabilitation, and prostheses to disabled veterans, services for disabled civilians remained few and far between. Not until 1945, with the promise of a more expansive and egalitarian welfare state on the horizon, did postwar politicians begin to regard the rehabilitation of *invalides civils*—a diverse category that included victims of bombings and forced labor camps, vocationally-injured workers, people with congenital disabilities, and tuberculosis and polio survivors—as a solution to France’s postwar manpower shortage. Determining how to pay for rehabilitation, however, remained an intractable problem. To finance the construction of these “medical-social” facilities, the state turned to private associations. This “French way of doing welfare” by blending private initiative and public support dated to the nineteenth century but became the principal model for delivering services to disabled people in post-WWII France, with social security *caisses* and the ministry of public health subsidizing private disability associations providing rehabilitation, education, and medical care.<sup>4</sup>

The *Journée Nationale des Paralysés et Infirmes Civils*—a state-sponsored national fundraising day for disability associations—appears to have originated in 1949 with the Association des Paralysés de France (APF), an advocacy and mutual aid organization founded in 1933 by the Catholic polio survivor André Trannoy.<sup>5</sup> During the Second World War, the APF and other disability associations had received subventions from the *Secours National* to construct vocational retraining centers for disabled adolescents. Eager to continue expanding their rehabilitation services in the postwar era, the APF’s leadership petitioned the *Conseil des Ministres* to allow its members, both disabled and able-bodied,

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<sup>2</sup> David M. Oshinsky, *Polio: An American Story* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> P. Chassagne, “Données statistiques. Évolution actuelle de la poliomyélite en France,” *Réadaptation*, n.14-15 (1954), 23-24; No author, “Évolution de la poliomyélite en France de 1954 à 1961,” *Bulletin de l’Institut National d’Hygiène* 18, no. 3 (1963), 393-454.

<sup>4</sup> Laura L. Downs, ‘And so we transform a people’: Women’s Social Action and the Reconfiguration of Politics on the Right in France, 1934-1947,” *Past and Present* 225 (Nov. 2014), 187-224.

<sup>5</sup> On the APF’s history, see André Trannoy, *Risqueuse l’impossible: la longue marche des immobiles* (Éditions Athanor, 1983) and André et Françoise Trannoy, *Saga: Association des Paralysés de France. Soixante ans d’aventure, 1933-1993* (Éditions Athanor, 1993).

to collect money on the street.<sup>6</sup> Multiple disability associations, including the Ligue pour l'Adaptation du Diminué Physique au Travail and the Association Nationale des Aveugles et Grands Infirmes, also received permission to fundraise, but the Journée Nationale became synonymous with the APF and the polio survivors who dominated its ranks, due in part to the APF's organized regional delegations and its sophisticated propaganda.

I first learned about the Journée Nationale from reading the APF's monthly bulletin *Faire Face*, and later found records in national and regional archives detailing the innumerable regulations that grew up around disability fundraising. But what I could not find were any traces of the publicity materials created by the APF. The Association's own archives, to the extent that they may exist in a warehouse in the Parisian *banlieue*, are largely inaccessible to researchers. Instead, much of what I learned about the APF's fundraising strategies came from Ebay and Delcampe, where I began purchasing ephemera related to polio philanthropy: postcards, lottery and raffle tickets, paper badges that APF quêtes pinned on donors, and of course, the posters, which now have a home in my university's graphic arts collection.<sup>7</sup> These items point to a thriving postwar philanthropic culture whose presence is otherwise missing from the "archives," offering insights into how the APF built a donor network. Lottery tickets, for example, reveal when and where they were sold, while many of the APF's postcards—often featuring photographs of disabled children—contain handwritten personal messages thanking donors for their contributions.

These primary sources also raise critical questions about the marketing of disability to the French public, an area in which the APF clearly drew inspiration from the March of Dimes' advertising techniques and fundraising methods. Since the 1930s, *Faire Face* had featured stories about FDR and the FNIP, and after 1945, polio survivors looked to the United States as a "promised land" where rehabilitation services were widespread and easily accessed. Trannoy was not alone in looking to American philanthropy as a model for reinvigorating certain sectors of the French economy or the social services.<sup>8</sup> In the late 1940s, French physicians, nurses, and social workers traveled to the U.S. to observe American polio clinics on trips sponsored by the Marshall Plan, and many returned eager to develop similar funding mechanisms in France. From the 1950 to 1952, the March of Dimes even came to Paris via the U.S. Embassy, whose employees organized high-profile

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<sup>6</sup> André Trannoy, "La Journée nationale du 5 juin: un pas de géant," *Faire Face*, March-April, 1949.

<sup>7</sup> My collection of polio-related ephemera contains nearly fifty objects, many of which I purchased for under ten dollars. The posters, however, were selling for \$350-450 each, which was well outside of my price range. I am grateful to Steven Galbraith, the director of RIT's Cary Collection, for agreeing to purchase the posters to ensure that they can be preserved for posterity.

<sup>8</sup> Emmanuelle Pavillion, *La Fondation de France, 1969-1994: l'invention d'un mécénat contemporain* (Economica, 1999).

“birthday balls” modeled on the American galas honoring FDR to raise money for French children with polio, a portion of which went into the APF’s coffers.<sup>9</sup>

In its posters for the Journée Nationale, the APF followed the March of Dimes’ playbook by deploying images of disabled children as symbols of childhood innocence destroyed by a disabling disease. As American disability historians have shown, the March of Dimes deliberately selected young children who were white, attractive, and not *too disabled* for its posters, to showcase their potential for successful rehabilitation. Elaborate press kits provided reporters with children’s names and information about their family history, in turn making the individual child’s “battle” with polio into a commodity marketed through the American mass media.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, we know little about the French girls featured in the Journée Nationale posters, although their clothing and haircuts mark them as residents of the Colonie de Saint-Fargeau, France’s first residential polio treatment facility, which the APF inherited in 1949.<sup>11</sup> Flanked by their braces and canes, the girls appear to ask, “is this what childhood should look like?” Many of the APF’s postcards and posters from the 1950s adopted a similar approach, showing disabled children at *colonies de vacances*, in school classrooms, and in rehabilitation clinics, simultaneously highlighting their similarities and differences from able-bodied children. In this way, French polio poster children differed significantly from the rosy-cheeked cherubins who had appeared on anti-tuberculosis stamps since the 1920s, as the focus of the propaganda shifted from preventing disease to responding to its aftermath. In an era when physicians and politicians worried openly about France’s demographic decline and regarded youth as the principal source of national rejuvenation, these posters would have exerted a powerful appeal.<sup>12</sup>

Much could be said about the commodification of disability in the Journée Nationale posters, but I am particularly interested in why these sources are missing from official “archives.” Despite working in over twenty state, départemental, and municipal archives in eight different cities, I located only two polio poster children among their collections. While this lacuna may reflect the dominant role played by private associations like the APF in the national day, it also suggests that archivists may not have found visual images of disabled children worth saving, in part because disabled people have too often been dismissed as historical actors in their own right. Equally important, what does the

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<sup>9</sup> “Pour les victimes de la paralysie infantile,” *L’Aube*, 15 January 1950; “Le prochain ‘bal Roosevelt’ à Paris,” *Le Figaro*, 29 January 1952, 2.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Longmore, *Telethons: Spectacle, Disability, and the Business of Charity* (Oxford, 2016); Celeste Tuong Vy Sharpe, *They Need You! Disability, Visual Culture, and the Poster Child, 1945-1980*, Ph.D. Dissertation, George Mason University, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Rebecca P. Scales, “Inventing Polio Care at the Colonie de Saint-Fargeau: Disability, Rehabilitation, and the Welfare State in Interwar France,” *The Journal of Social History* 57, no. 4 (Summer 2024), 520-549.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Jobs, *Riding the New Wave: Youth and the Rejuvenation of France* (Stanford University Press, 2007).

presence of so much material about polio in online marketplaces suggest about the collective memory of polio in France, or even more significantly, about the place of disabled people in France's national historical narratives? These are all questions I explore in my book-in-progress, *Polio and its Afterlives: Disability and Epidemic Disease in Twentieth Century France*.

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