HISTORY

Exiles, Nazis, camp survivors... the secret history of a Paris hotel

In Jane Rogoyska's Hotel Exile, the inhabitants of the Lutetia form a microcosm of a city at war — it's an exceptional piece of storytelling

The Lutetia hosted resistance fighters, German military intelligence officers and returned Jewish survivors

MIGUEL MEDINA/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

James McConnachie

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The Lutetia might look like just another luxury Paris hotel — albeit one with a particularly lovely art deco façade. You'll pay over £1,000 to stay a night there, and a massage in its spa could set you back another £320. A small stone plaque reveals a very different story. It was to this well-heeled corner of the Left Bank that French survivors of the concentration camps returned in 1945 — skeletal, riddled with lice and typhus, many still in striped shirts. So distressing was their condition that Parisian scouts who volunteered to care for them were overcome with nausea.

In this exceptional work of non-fiction — you couldn't call it just a history book, it's more than that — the British writer Jane Rogoyska tells not just that extraordinary story, but the wider story of the hotel, and Paris, and France at war. Before the Lutetia became a haven, it was the headquarters of German military intelligence, the Abwehr. Before that, it was where German political exiles met to plot their anti-Nazi activities.

As a microcosm, the hotel works so well (something the journalist Lyse Doucet found in her own similarly structured book *The Finest Hotel in Kabul*). Lutetia was Paris's name in Roman times, and the hotel shares the city's motto, *fluctuat nec mergitur* — wave-tossed but unsinking. Charles de Gaulle chose it for his wedding night and Ernest Hemingway drank in the basement American Bar.

That, though, is the stuff of hotel-brochure history. This book's mood is much darker. Rogoyska is best known as the author of *Surviving Katyn*, a harrowing investigative book about the massacre of Polish PoWs by Stalinist Russia. She begins here in

1933, with the “trickle that will become a stream, that will in turn become a river”, as 25,000 German refugees arrived in Paris. The socialists and communists, the writers and artists, the Jews.

She captures the historical moment with a rare combination of urgency and empathy. At the border, “hats are pulled down over eyes, books studied with intense attention, the same line read again and again”. At arrival, “exhausted, grey-faced people” step out into the Gare de l’Est “like guests unsure if they are at the right party, in the right clothes, at the right time”.

Rogoyska pursues the refugees into the cafés and cheap hotels of the Left Bank, focusing on the women. There’s the photographer Gisela (later Gisèle) Freund, who set up a disastrous photoshoot with James Joyce — he tripped and cut his head on one of her lamps — and befriended the shy, owlish intellectual Walter Benjamin. There’s the Jewish novelist Anna Seghers, who sent her children off for swimming lessons. They might soon need to flee Europe, she thought, and that would mean crossing an ocean.

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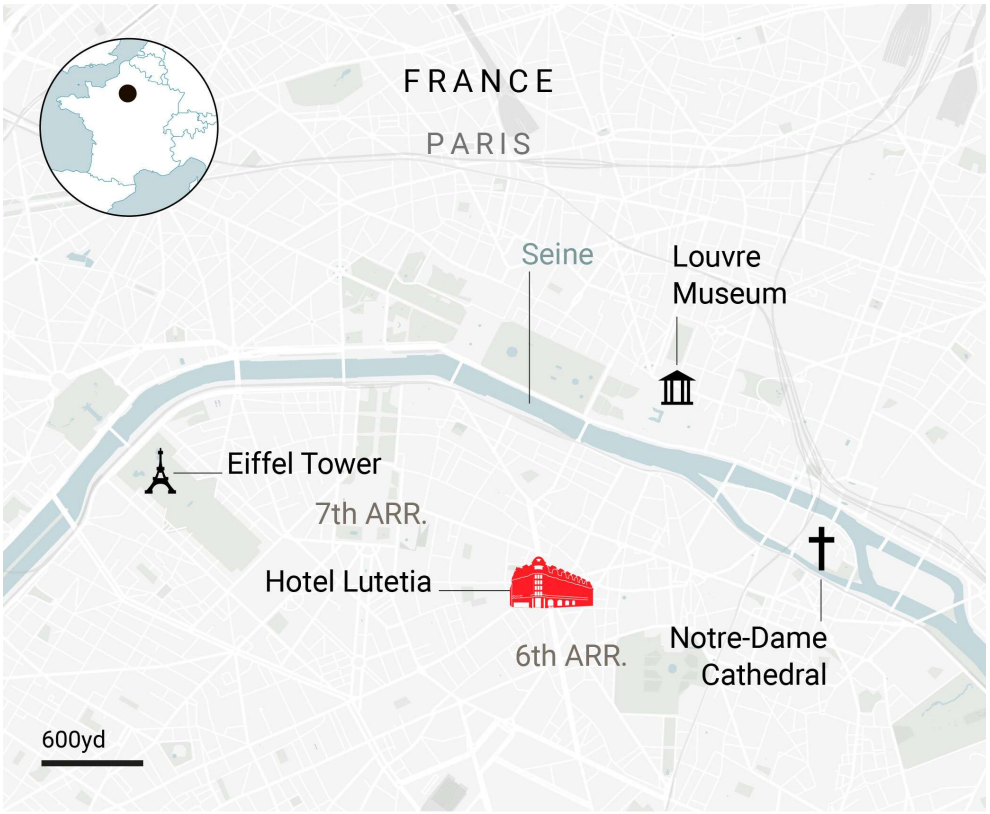
The narrative comes together in September 1935, when the “Lutetia Committee” was established — a movement to unite the German left in France, with the hotel as its headquarters. It

was set up by the bull-like communist propagandist Willi Münzenberg, and drew in the elderly Heinrich Mann, novelist and brother of the better-known Thomas.

Rogoyska imagines the German radicals in the smoke-filled, chandelier-lit rooms. Wondering if the bellboy can hear their stomachs rumbling. Wondering who might be a Gestapo agent. She imagines the staff too, in their blue “redingotes” with red collars, impassively taking in “the parade of threadbare suits, grey faces, worn-out shoes”.

The political activity achieved little. There were resolutions, and covert propaganda was produced: anti-Nazi diatribes concealed in tomato-seed packets, or excerpts from *The Communist Manifesto* bound into German books. Some derided Heinrich Mann as “the Hindenburg of exile”. Rogoyska stands up for him because “he never gave up believing in the power of words to effect change”.



Map: The Times and The Sunday Times

But the words didn't work. First, the French themselves rounded up "enemy aliens" and sent them to prison camps. Benjamin, interned near Nevers, held outdoor philosophy classes, for which he was paid three Gauloises or a trouser button. Mann was safe for a time in the south — his wife trained birds to fly in and out of the windows, taking food from open cages.

As the German invasion progressed, the desperation grew. The writer Lion Feuchtwanger persuaded the French commandant of his camp to put all 2,000 inmates on an emergency train towards the Atlantic coast. En route, the news arrived that *les boches* were advancing on their destination, and the train was stopped. Eventually, it became clear that the Germans in question were in fact the fleeing exiles themselves. What a story of the chaos of war.

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When the actual German army entered Paris, it was with "almost indecent ease", in Rogoyska's chilling words. "Like a man who has threatened a woman with violence if she does not let him enter her home," she writes, "she yields but the disdain remains."

At the Lutetia, though, any disdain was concealed behind professionalism. The Nazis took over the best hotels in Paris, and the Lutetia became the home of military intelligence. The staff were the same people who had served Münzenberg and Mann. The very finest wines and champagnes were secretly walled up in the cellar, but plenty of others were available. Absurdly low prices were guaranteed by the rate of exchange, which of course the Germans set.

The hotel filled with “field grey and jackboots”. Rogoyska has trawled memoirs from hotel staff and ex-officers, unearthing stories that are peculiarly resonant. Like the one about the Abwehr man who choked on an artichoke at dinner. The outraged German soldiers summoned the hotel chef to accuse him of sabotage — before an officer stepped in to explain the man had been ignorantly eating the choke, not the heart. “They are, at heart, insecure, these occupiers,” she writes.

Adolf Hitler and other high-ranking Nazis following a tour of the Eiffel Tower in Paris, 1940

HEINRICH HOFFMANN/HULTON-DEUTSCH COLLECTION/CORBIS/GETTY IMAGES

The head of the Abwehr, Admiral Canaris, took one of the best rooms — he usually booked a twin, to accommodate his dachshunds. His officers, in between champagne receptions, began work on tracing and eliminating members of the French resistance.

Some were betrayed — Rogoyska tells the distressing story of the informer priest Robert Alesch — others fled. Mann got over the Pyrenees on foot. Benjamin, clutching a briefcase containing a precious manuscript, was guided over the mountains by a young woman. He made it to the border only to discover that transit visas such as the one he carried had been cancelled the day before. He killed himself, using the tablets he had been saving for seven years.

All this material alone would make for a fine work of micro-history. But it is the book's third and final section that makes it special. Two million French men and women returned from Germany, mostly ex-PoWs or returning forced labourers. About 2,500 Jews made it back as well, of the 75,000 — both native French and refugees — who were taken.

The Lutetia was commandeered again, this time to serve as a reception centre. Returnees were greeted with blasts of DDT, to kill any lice, and subjected to painful debriefing interviews aimed at establishing who they had seen die. Children reacted to the uniforms worn by the volunteer scouts with terror. One returnee found that he no longer knew how to use cutlery.

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In the lobby, and outside, lists went up on hoardings ordinarily used for municipal elections. Crowds gathered. Occasionally, rarely, relatives were reunited — these moments of joy "seized by the entire team of volunteers and shared around like chocolate".

More often, the news was bad. The children of the Ukrainian Jewish novelist Irène Némirovsky came to the hotel every day for two months, hoping for news. They were 13 and 8. One released resistance fighter remembered the impossibility of explaining to a relative proffering a photograph that "they show us a human being, we knew only a remnant". Another took the Metro home to his mother's apartment. She opened the door and asked: "Have you come to bring me news of my son?" "Mum," he replied, "it's me."

This is a scintillatingly good book. I think it will win prizes — not least because it is subtly experimental. It is a group biography. That can make a book labyrinthine, but here it feels right to be a little lost in the maze. It also does away with chapter titles, using short, titled sections instead. This fits the uneasy, urgent, fragmented mood of the book. Most riskily, it slips in and out of the present tense like a contemporary novel. Ordinarily, I'd hate that. In Rogoyska's hands, it feels thrillingly immersive.

In fact, I've rarely felt such a sense of the historical moment. Or indeed the present moment. Because if ever a book were about now as well as then, it's this one.

Hotel Exile: Paris in the Shadow of War **by Jane Rogoyska (Allen Lane £25 pp368). To order a copy go to timesbookshop.co.uk. Free UK standard P&P on orders over £25. Special discount available for Times+ members**

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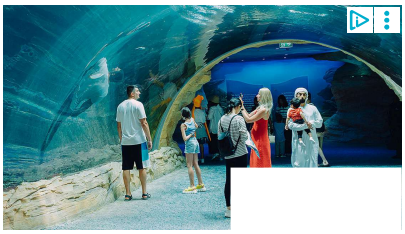

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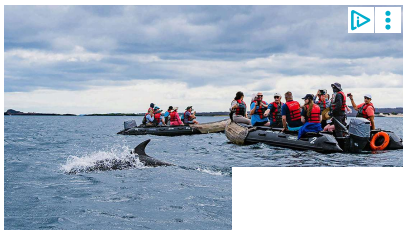

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