

Hotel Europe/2

## The Hotel Lutetia in Paris: redemption and European memory

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The Hotel Lutetia has never been a simple hotel. Not only because it is the only grand hotel on the Left Bank of the Seine that embodies the spirit of bohemian Paris — its Art Nouveau rooms welcomed the greatest writers, artists and intellectuals of the twentieth century, from Guillaume Apollinaire to James Joyce, from Matisse to André Gide, making it a privileged observatory of European cultural life. The Hotel Lutetia contains within its walls the history of the twentieth century in its entirety, with its contradictions, its wounds, its traumas, its rebirths. Designed in 1910 at the initiative of the Bouicaut family as luxury accommodation for customers of the Le Bon Marché department store arriving from the provinces and from overseas, the Lutetia in the 1930s became an outpost of resistance and intellectual ferment, welcoming anti-Nazi German exiles including Heinrich Mann and a young Willy Brandt, future Chancellor of West Germany. But in the summer of 1940, with the occupation, it was requisitioned by the Nazis and transformed into the headquarters of the Abwehr, German military intelligence: from refuge and oasis of freedom it became the Third Reich's command centre in Paris. The head of the Geheime Feldpolizei, the Wehrmacht's secret police, set up his office there and organised operations alongside the collaborator Henri Lafont, a former gangster who had become head of the French Gestapo. But in August 1944, with the Liberation, the Lutetia once again became a symbol of hope and resurrection. At the behest of General de Gaulle, it was used as a repatriation centre for prisoners, displaced persons and concentration camp survivors, becoming a crucial gathering place for families reuniting after the dark years of the war.

It is the remarkable story of the Lutetia that British writer Jane Rogoyska has just recounted in her book *Hotel Exile: Paris in the Shadow of War* (Penguin). “I discovered the Hotel Lutetia while researching the fate of a group of German anti-fascists who fled Nazi Germany in the 1930s and ended up living in exile in Paris. I came across a reference to the ‘Lutetia Committee’ on a French website. As I read on, I realised that the story of these Weimar-era intellectuals was only the first part of a much broader story about the Hotel Lutetia, encompassing the occupation of Paris and the immediate post-war period,” Jane Rogoyska tells *Il Foglio*. “I was reluctant to write about the Nazis or the Holocaust — these are subjects addressed by so many other writers and historians. But there was a photograph of a group of former deportees sitting in the Hotel Lutetia's dining room, still wearing their striped concentration camp uniforms. It is a haunting image. It disturbed me and drove me to want to know more. That is how this book came about.” Few other places in Europe tell the story of the twentieth century as the Lutetia does. “My background is not that of a historian, but of a scholar of literature and film. For me, the most important thing is to focus on the fate of ordinary human beings who find themselves at the centre of shattering events. I want my readers to come into direct contact with the characters I write about and to consider the dilemmas they face as if they were their own. Choosing a single building as a lens through which to observe their lives allowed me to write about these complex and terrible events at a microcosmic level,” explains Rogoyska, who in 2013 wrote a book about German photographer Gerda Taro, companion of Robert Capa.

*Hotel Exile* tells the story of three communities: the exiles, the occupiers and the survivors. “The theme of exile was my starting point and runs as a common thread throughout. The first group experiences physical exile: the exiles are forced to flee not once, but multiple times; for them, not fleeing means ending up in prison or dying. In the second part, exile takes on a bizarre form: we have tourist-conquerors living in luxury in a city they have occupied by force; they hold absolute power, yet they are also strangely vulnerable, isolated from their ‘hosts’ by suspicion and fear,” says the writer. In the final part of the book, the exile experienced is different. “We encounter individuals who have endured things so far removed from our reality that they are isolated from the rest of society, silenced by others' inability to even remotely imagine what they have witnessed.”

One of the most compelling stories is that of Anna Seghers, the pseudonym of Netty Reiling, one of the very few women among the German exiles. “As a mother of young children and a successful writer, she was a unique figure. I was struck by her determination to create a sense of stability for her children wherever they went: after fleeing Germany, she chose an apartment far from the centre of Paris so that the children could be close to nature and attend a good school; she prepared tasty dishes with the meagre supplies available, told them stories, read books, and together with her husband Laszlo always managed to create an atmosphere of calm and normality wherever they went. And wherever they went, she made sure they attended school, even when they fled the Nazis again during the war,” recounts Rogoyska. “At the same time, she continued to write during their exile, producing her two most celebrated works, *The Seventh Cross* and *Transit*,” adds the British writer, who also cites Walter Benjamin and Paul Léon among the stories that moved her most during her research. “They were impractical scholars who spent their lives in libraries, among books, so obsessed with their work that they were unable to see the impending disaster. They were truly vulnerable: wonderful, learned men who stood no chance against the brutality of Nazism.”

The Lutetia was both a place of persecution and a place of return and hope. What does this ambivalence reveal about European memory? “Parisians often say that the Lutetia is unique among Paris's grand hotels because it received ‘redemption’ by welcoming the deportees after the occupation. But it is not buildings that need redemption — it is human beings. Memories are held in the minds of human beings, and we must find ways to keep the memories of terrible events alive and relevant to our present lives. As fewer and fewer people remain who can speak directly of the terrible events that marked the twentieth century, those events become less real to generations who have only seen them in films or read about them in novels. They become folk tales, stories, myths that can be distorted or called into question. It is at that point that we risk repeating our mistakes.”



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