OPINION

How do we know when we are living through a catastrophe?

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During the occupation of France, Paris's famed Hotel Lutetia became the headquarters of the Abwehr, or German military intelligence.

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Jane Rogoyska is the author of Hotel Exile: Paris in the Face of Fascism and the Shadow of War, 1933-1945, *which is a finalist for the Women's Prize for Non-Fiction.*

The luxurious Hotel Lutetia seems, at first glance, an unlikely place to try to understand the nature of crisis. The Lutetia is a Paris institution, the only "grand" hotel on the city's bohemian Left Bank. Ever since it first opened in 1910, it has served as a meeting place for artists, intellectuals and politicians: André Gide took his lunch here, James Joyce lived for a while in one of its rooms.

It has a darker history, too.

I first encountered the Lutetia when I was researching the lives of German anti-fascists in 1930s Paris. A fleeting reference in an article revealed that a group of these exiles – prominent writers, intellectuals, and politicians who fled Germany in 1933 when Hitler came to power – used to meet at the hotel in the mid-1930s in the hopes of forming an alternative government ready to take power when the Nazis fell, which surely would be soon. They called themselves "The Lutetia Committee." But while they argued amongst themselves, war came to France, the exiles were forced to flee again, and the smart hotels of Paris were requisitioned by the Nazis. During the occupation of France, the Lutetia became the headquarters of the Abwehr, or German military intelligence. After D-Day, which took place 82 years ago and launched the liberation of France, the hotel was transformed once more, this time into a reception centre for deportees – resistance members and Jews – returning from the camps. For a few months in the spring of 1945, a vast volunteer operation transformed the hotel into something more resembling a hospital.

Opinion: On Juno Beach, the past collides with a more dangerous future

Today, we find ourselves in a moment when the word fascism is being used with a frequency that would have seemed hysterical just a few years ago. The rise of authoritarian strongmen, the targeting of minorities and institutions, the weaponization of the state against perceived enemies – we see these patterns, and reach for the 1930s comparison almost reflexively. But we do so with the benefit of hindsight. We know how that story ended.

The people in my book did not, just as we cannot know how things will turn out now. The fate of the characters in *Hotel Exile* illuminates the terrible gap between what people believe is happening and what is actually going on – a gap measured not in terms of ignorance, but in our inability, as human beings, to foresee the future.

Although I write about history, my aim is to allow events to unfold from the perspective of the characters involved. In this way, the reader is invited to walk by their side and, perhaps, to ask of themselves: In such circumstances, what would I do? How would I react? What choices – moral or otherwise – would I make under conditions of extreme danger, hunger or desperation? It is all too easy, looking back, to underestimate the limits of human perception in the face of escalating threat. We ask ourselves: Why didn't they flee when they had the chance? Why did they not fight back?

The reality is that those limits are not a moral failing, but a structural feature of how we experience time. We make life-or-death decisions not with the clarity of retrospection but in the moment, our minds shaped by habit, our viewpoint partial, our judgment clouded by emotion. None of us can see the whole picture, and we cannot predict the future. For all the grand technological advances of the 21st century, AI is no more capable than I am of telling you what is going to happen tomorrow. You might as well study the entrails of a sheep or read tea leaves in a cup.

So how do we recognize an unfolding catastrophe? How can we know if or when to act?

There is a certain clarity in the urgent physical threat: the knock on the door, the boots on the staircase. The message is clear, it is no longer a choice: Get out

now! Pack your bags, take your children and flee. It is the subtler forms of danger that present us with the kind of dilemmas most of us hope we never have to face.

Through the story of the Hotel Lutetia, we see how choices and happenstance combine to determine who survives a catastrophic situation.

CHARLES PLATIAU/REUTERS

Consider Paul Léon, James Joyce's devoted secretary, a Russian-born Jew who was usually to be found working alongside the Irish author at his flat on Rue des Vignes, or keeping him company in one of his favourite spots, including the Lutetia. Léon and his family chose to return to Paris in the summer of 1940 from the relative safety of the countryside because he missed his books, his wife Lucie had to work, and his son needed to continue his education. As Lucie wrote after the war: "It all seemed reasonable at the time. It was only later that we realized what a mistake we had made."

The pull of normalcy was overpowering: Money was tight; Lucie had a job for an American magazine; their teenage son Alexis was studying at the prestigious Lycée Louis-le-Grand. The fact that the school was open for the new semester seemed a reassuring signal that things were getting back to normal after the chaos of the invasion. Indeed, the German occupiers went to great lengths to create an atmosphere of normalcy in France at this time. Of course, they, too, could not foresee the future: This was supposed to be the beginning of their thousand-year Reich, after all.

It is hard to overestimate the pull of habit and routine in our decision-making. Faced with the unfamiliar, all human beings tend to grasp at what they consider to be the solid foundations of their existence: their homes, their jobs, their routines, their children's schools. Paul and Lucie Léon were not alone in their decision to return to Paris. Many foreign-born Jews who had lived in France for decades, as well as French Jews whose families had been in France

for generations, could not believe that they could be betrayed by their Republic, where all citizens were supposed to be equal under the law.

One year after the Léons returned, the Irish writer Samuel Beckett was astonished to spot Paul Léon walking down the street. What on Earth was he still doing in Paris? Mr. Beckett had witnessed the rapid disintegration of the situation for Jews in France: He had seen friends insulted and beaten, thrown out of their jobs. He urged Léon to leave the city at once as other families had done. "I have to wait until tomorrow when my son takes his *bachot,*" replied the devoted father, referring to France's baccalaureate exams. The following day, Paul Léon was seized in the first major roundup of foreign-born Jews, taken to Drancy transit camp and later placed on the first transport from France to Auschwitz, where he perished.

We agonize over decisions, but there is also a random element that none of us can control. The philosopher Walter Benjamin, attempting to escape France via the Pyrenees, was turned back at the Spanish border. In despair, he took his own life, unaware that the rule change that blocked his passage would change again the very next day. Had he travelled the day before or the day after, he would have crossed into safety.

Opinion: At a time of fascist resurgence, there remains hope for democracy

Choices, coupled with random events: In times of conflict, these two elements are the difference between death or survival. The writer Arthur Koestler met prominent Social Democrats Rudolf Breitscheid and Rudolf Hilferding in Marseille in the summer of 1940, a time when any foreign individual threatened by the Nazi regime was desperately trying to find a way out. The pair were high on the Nazis' wanted list, yet when Mr. Koestler asked why they didn't try some unofficial route, the men replied in outraged tones that they refused to contemplate such a course, confident that the Vichy authorities would grant them what they needed. Trapped – as Mr. Koestler saw it – by their dogged faith in the forces of "legality and righteousness," the two men continued to trust that somehow the system that had shaped their beliefs would deliver the correct solution. While Mr. Koestler engaged in a daring escape with some British POWs via North Africa, Breitscheid and Hilferding

remained in Marseille and were later arrested and handed over to the Nazis. These were not fools: they were intelligent, highly educated men who were simply not able to adapt to the brutality of their new situation.

To a citizen living in a western democracy in 2026, it may seem as if we are surrounded by unfolding catastrophes, any one of which might at some point soon pose an existential threat. It can feel downright paralyzing. And yet, for those of us who are citizens of relatively stable countries, the threat appears neither urgent nor immediate, or at least, we do not feel ourselves to be threatened personally – not in the terrifying, get-out-now sense. Nevertheless, some people in certain democracies, hating the direction their country has recently taken, have chosen to retreat from public life and wait it out; others, finding the political atmosphere suffocating, have made the choice to leave while they can. Will they look foolish in a couple of years' time? Or will they seem – in hindsight – prescient?

How do we know if we are living through a catastrophe? Must we accept that we cannot know for sure until we reach the moment when urgency overcomes habit and routine?

The Hotel Lutetia, with its extraordinary history, offers a lens that has allowed me to explore the way in which Nazi ideology cast its twisted shadow over so many lives. If its story can tell us anything about today's world, I would hope that it might simply make us think: about what it means to flee, about what war does and where hatred leads. It might perhaps also serve as a reminder of the need to remain vigilant, because the risk is to become so embedded in those habits and routines to which we are all so attached that we fail to notice when the catastrophe is near.