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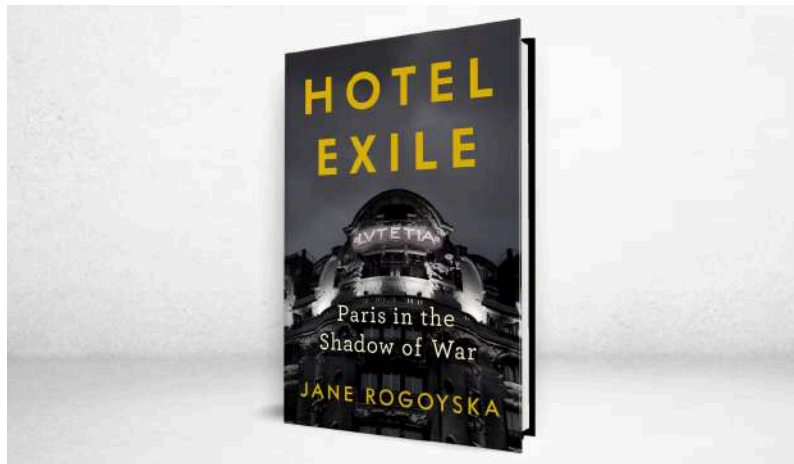
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‘Hotel Exile’ Review: Occupiers and Survivors

The Nazis commandeered the Hotel Lutetia after capturing Paris. The hotel later became a center for those returning from the death camps.

By Michael S. Roth

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In “La Douleur,” a slim book published in 1985 and based on her wartime diaries, the novelist Marguerite Duras describes regularly going to the Hotel Lutetia in Paris to see if her husband is among the concentration-camp survivors being repatriated there. Crowds stand outside looking at old photos posted on bulletin boards, pictures taken of people before they were rounded up and transported to Auschwitz, Buchenwald, Dachau. But those who are returning look little like the ones in the pictures. They hear the plaintive calls: Have you seen my mother, my husband, my children? In their striped uniforms and with their shaved heads, they seem like voyagers returning from another planet—a place of torture, hunger, death—arriving through the portal afforded by a luxury hotel, the same hotel that only months before had been the headquarters of the German army’s intelligence unit.

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Hotel Exile: Paris in the Shadow of War

By Jane Rogoyska

Norton



In “Hotel Exile: Paris in the Shadow of War,” Jane Rogoyska uses the Lutetia as a lens through which to examine how Paris went from a refuge for those fleeing fascist persecution, to a city all too willing to please a vicious occupying power, and then to the capital of a country eager to present itself as having successfully battled for its freedom. The outlines of this story are familiar, but Ms. Rogoyska sees

it anew through the Hotel Lutetia.

Built shortly before World War I to complement the Left Bank’s Le Bon Marché department store, the hotel hosted visiting tourists, businessmen, families and conventions of professionals from all over Europe. Ms. Rogoyska—a historian, filmmaker and the author of “Surviving Katyn: Stalin’s Polish Massacre and the Search for Truth” (2021)—is especially interested in the dissidents and Jews who wound up there after Hitler came to power in 1933. They asked themselves so many questions: Will he last long? Is this the beginning of a disaster or a strange aberration?

In Germany, the persecution of leftists and Jews provided some advantages to others, especially in government and the professions. Even those who recognized that officials were not following the rule of law but instead lying to enrich themselves and attack their enemies might nevertheless have found a way to accommodate themselves to the new reality. They might even have overlooked the preposterous claims that real Germans were being discriminated against. The tide was powerful, and by the late 1930s, Ms. Rogoyska notes, one could “throw a Jew off a moving train and no one [would] intervene.”

Ms. Rogoyska describes how the Lutetia became a haven for those who had fled the Nazis as well as those who were aligned with them. As the hotel manager would say, “*un client, c’est un client.*” (“A customer is a customer.”)

The hotel trumpeted this apparent neutrality and was dubbed “the Switzerland of Paris.”

The option of real neutrality dissolved with the failure of the Maginot Line, France’s string of defensive installations along its border with Germany. The author describes how in June 1940 the Nazis requisitioned the hotel to be the home of the Abwehr, the more civilized part of the intelligence services, at least compared with the Gestapo. There were small acts of resistance, as when the best wines in the cellar were secretly walled off from the Germans. And there may have been even more important acts, if indeed the hotel’s cellars were used to hide escaped French prisoners of war. The staff’s “rebellion,” Ms. Rogoyska tells us, lay “not in poisoning the Germans’ soup but in keeping something hidden from their masters, right under their noses: the finest wine, and perhaps a few men, too.” But for the most part, the staff at the hotel tried to do their jobs with stoic professionalism.

Outside, there was more enthusiasm for cooperating with the new German elite. “The very nature of the German occupation,” the author writes, led many into a “take what you can” form of corruption. As the rule of law receded, as is so often the case under authoritarianism, greed and corruption came to the fore.

Drawing from the voluminous historical literature, as well as interviews conducted by various researchers with hotel staff over the years, Ms. Rogoyska relates heartbreaking stories of families destroyed, children murdered and law-abiding Jews naively signing up with French authorities with the misplaced confidence that they would not be turned over to the Nazis. The priest Robert Alesch’s deadly penetration of Resistance networks for cash and prestige is a particularly despicable example of duplicity, greed and hard-heartedness camouflaged by religion and an ideology of racial superiority.

“Hotel Exile” also relates the extraordinary transformation of the hotel into a center for those returning from concentration camps. Local boy scouts are sent to the hotel to help the former prisoners walk, find their bearings, become accustomed to eating real food again—as one volunteer recalled,

“blind strangers in the world of the sighted, trying and pretending to understand what they have suffered without ever having understood.” A young Michel Rocard, later the prime minister of France, was among those who went to help. On seeing the faces of men who “had been destroyed by other men,” he would write: “It was frightening. We didn’t speak to them. *Le silence s’impose*”—silence was inescapable.

There is a great sadness in this book and also the occasional miraculous story of couples finding each other or of parents discovering a child who survived. A French writer is recognized by a Jewish survivor decades after helping him: “You were my goy-scout!” Two Auschwitz survivors are still overwhelmed, 60 years later, when they describe finding each other in the Lutetia’s lobby in 1945.

Ms. Rogoyska judges that the Lutetia was the only one of Paris’s grand hotels offered the “redemption” of being put in the service of survivors. As she looks at the renovated building today, she recognizes that its walls don’t contain the “emotional residue” of the past. But they have inspired her respectful silence and a powerful account of some of our worst and our best moments in confronting tyrannical violence. As the novelist Milan Kundera put it, “the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.”

—*Mr. Roth is the president of Wesleyan University and the author of “Memory, Trauma, and History: Essays on Living With the Past” and, most recently, “The Student: A Short History.”*

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