



NONFICTION

Hotel Exile: Paris in the Shadow of War

Jane Rogoyska

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Review

By Eleanor Foa – July 6, 2026

Some history books view the past from on high. Others, including this one, view the past from ground level, walking us through the joys and sorrows of individual lives as though they are our neighbors. *Hotel Exile* is a novelistic recounting of pre- and post-war Paris (1933 to 1945), and the lives of prominent artists and intellectuals who intersected with the Hotel Lutetia, the only grand hotel on the Left Bank. Figures such as James Joyce, Walter Benjamin, Samuel Beckett, Heinrich Mann, Fred and Lilo Stein, Anna Seghers, Charles de Gaulle, along with countless other lesser known refugees, displaced persons, and Holocaust survivors, as well as the staff of the Abwehr—the intelligence service of the German military during the occupation—take up residence in the hotel during the years covered here. There is a thread of

continuity to some of their lives; for example, the husband-and-wife photographers, Fred and Lilo Stein, ultimately set up shop in the US. There is also an unusual description of Hitler's brief visit to Paris, a city he revered and yet saw only once, when the Germans were in full control and he was taken on a twenty-four-hour whirlwind tour. Another profile details a betrayer—a priest, responsible for many deaths of brave resistance fighters. This book is akin to if an American journalist were to cover the Roaring Twenties and the Depression by weaving together the disparate lives of those who occupied the Waldorf Astoria; it's an interesting conceit which captures a mood and a moment in history, even without focusing on the characters in too much depth.

While much will be familiar to students who study the Holocaust in France—the round ups, the deportations, the frantic departures for the South—it is in the small details of these lives that the author brings home the reality of individuals and families caught in a miasma of rumors and danger. Who could conceive what lay around the corner? Rogoyska brilliantly captures what it was like to be part of the frantic upheaval of those years—years when some survived, some escaped, and some never returned.

One of the most moving and original parts of this history is found in the last section of the book, which focuses on the brief post-war years when survivors returned to the hotel, which had been designated to receive and process French war survivors. This was a world that did not understand what a concentration camp was. Civilians expected prisoners of war to return, as in previous wars, but of course, this was unlike any other war. Photographs of missing family members are posted on the Hotel's walls, crowds surrounded buses and other vehicles bringing home emaciated individuals. And those just released from Buchenwald, Dachau, and other concentration camps—especially children—were scarcely able to comprehend the normal world. Rogoyska searingly depicts the horror of those months, when wives didn't recognize husbands, or mothers their children; when so many never found their missing friends, lovers, and family members.

This is not a history for the faint of heart, but it reminds us, yet again, of the horrors of those years, especially for European Jews.

Eleanor Foa is an author, journalist, and corporate writer. Her memoir MIXED MESSAGES: Reflections on an Italian Jewish Family and Exile was published in November 2019. Her work appears in national newspapers, magazines and websites. She is the author of Whither Thou Goest and In Good Company, President of Eleanor Foa Associates (eleanorfoa.com), past president of the American Society of Journalists and Authors, and received literary residencies at Yaddo and the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts.

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