



The Hotel Lutetia

## *Prologue*

A hotel, explains the former concierge in the elegantly leathered library of the Hotel Lutetia in Paris, is not an actor in a drama. It is simply the stage on which dramas are played out. We, the staff, are invisible, like stagehands who work behind the scenes to allow the performance to proceed without a hitch. We do not interfere. We do not speak of the triumphs or calamities of our guests. What we may witness we cannot share, for the reputation of a grand hotel is based, above all, on discretion. So if you want to find the stories, you have to look outside the hotel, he says. We have nothing here.

A hotel is like a train station in slow motion: a place for people who are passing through, a temporary stop on the way to somewhere else. It mimics home, offering comfort without love. Sometimes, it is a place to hide, to conceal a secret life.

A hotel is a neutral territory upon which friends and enemies may meet. It does not judge its clients so long as they behave with appropriate discretion and pay their bills. Exiled politicians may meet here to thrash out the blueprint for a future that will never happen. They can book the President Salon for conferences where delegates fight for control of an agenda that will never be realized. They can drink coffee and argue among themselves for as long as they wish so long as they pay for the hire of the room, observed by discreet staff and enemy spies.

But a hotel, like a country, can be invaded and occupied, made to serve a purpose other than luxury or commerce. Staff must act with the same professional consideration whether they serve artists, businessmen, eccentric aristocrats or enemy soldiers. James Joyce or Admiral Canaris, does it matter who is ordering the wine?

And yet, there is a sense of contamination: a sense that, by serving the enemy, however unwillingly, a moral compromise has been

made. When the hotel is again occupied, this time by the victims of the former conquerors, there is an opportunity for the building, and its staff, to be purified.

*Épuration.* A potent term containing within it a very Catholic sentiment – the purification of sins, set in contrast to the ideology of racial purification which has created this horror.

At the Hotel Lutetia, purification comes in two forms: the moral purification gained from serving those who have been starved and beaten, allowing them a taste of the luxury ordinarily reserved for the wealthy. And the physical purification administered to these same victims, who arrive at the hotel clad in filthy striped pyjamas, riddled with lice, to be greeted with a puff of DDT, the swift removal of their tattered rags and a hot, cleansing shower.

The origins of the English word ‘hotel’ lie first in French, *hôtel*, meaning ‘a mansion, palace, large house’ which derives from Old French *ostel* / *hostel*, ‘a place where guests are received’ – a house, home, dwelling, inn, lodging, shelter. This in turn derives from medieval Latin *hospitale*, ‘inn, large house’. The words ‘hospital’ and ‘hotel’ therefore derive from the same origin, the Latin *hospes*, ‘guest, host’.

So a hotel and a hospital are not so far apart.

The Hotel Lutetia is a Paris institution, the only ‘grand’ hotel on the city’s bohemian Left Bank. Situated in the 6th *arrondissement*, planted elegantly between the Latin Quarter and the Champs de Mars, the Lutetia is close to the Senate, the elite *École Normale Supérieure*, the Jardin de Luxembourg and the famous cafés of boulevard Saint-Germain. Ever since it opened in 1910 the Lutetia has served as a meeting place for artists, intellectuals, musicians, politicians. André Gide took his lunch here, James Joyce lived in one of its rooms, Picasso and Matisse were regular guests. It has a darker history, too.

This is not the story of a famous Paris hotel. It is about three groups of people who are connected to a particular city, to that particular hotel, to one another, and to the grim ideology which dictates the course of their lives. These groups are linked – willingly or not – by race, nationality and language, and by their status as outsiders.

## *Prologue*

They all live in exile, in profoundly different ways. They are displaced, dislocated, their lives disrupted. They are temporary beings who live out of suitcases, their drama playing out in many hotel rooms. The Hotel Lutetia is the prism through which we view their lives.

There are three phases in our relationship with the Lutetia: in the first, the hotel fulfils its normal function by accommodating guests in its bedrooms and banqueting halls, providing them with service, food, drinks, sometimes a bed for the night or a platform to speak from. We cross its threshold as temporary guests, one group among many, anonymous and unremarked except by the Nazi spies stationed in the lobby or waiting in the bar, alert for eavesdropping opportunities after the meeting's end. In the second phase we take possession of the building and transform its function, changing it physically, inside and out. It is not ours; we have stolen it and imposed our will upon its staff. In the third, the hotel becomes a shelter, a place of healing – a hospital of sorts.



Exile in café (Wolf Franck), Paris 1935, by Fred Stein

PART I

*Before: 1933–1939*

*Not everyone's life is like a house that belongs to him, and that he can go on decorating ever more richly with the furniture of his memory. Some people live in hotels, in many hotels. The years close behind them like hotel doors – and the only thing that remains is a little courage and no regrets.*

Erich Maria Remarque – *Arch of Triumph*

## *Flight*

It is a cold night in the spring of 1933 when Gisela Freund arrives at Frankfurt station. A handful of travellers hurry through the rain to catch the Paris express, which is ready to leave. As she approaches the train she hears the sound of boots against the wet cobbles. Turning, she glimpses the silhouettes of two uniformed SS men. Her heart starts beating violently. What if they spot her?

She is twenty-four years old, wearing a simple skirt and a brown suede jacket. In her hand, a small suitcase. Round her neck, a Leica camera which her father gave her when she passed her school exams.

As she enters a third-class compartment, she notes one other passenger, a middle-aged man seated next to the window, his hat pulled down over his eyes. He appears to be dozing. Closing the door as quietly as she can, Gisela puts her suitcase in the rack then seats herself opposite him, clutching her camera. She checks her watch: the train is about to depart.

The silence seems to make time stretch. Then comes the sound she has been dreading: heavy footsteps, voices, doors opening and closing. The man opposite seems to be watching her attentively.

The compartment door opens and an SS officer enters, bringing with him a rush of cold night air. He holds out his hand.

‘Papers.’

He barely glances at the passport held out to him by the man. Turning toward the girl, he takes her passport and starts slowly leafing through it.

‘A student? Where are you going?’

*Hotel Exile*

‘Back to Paris for my studies.’ She forces herself to take a neutral, bland tone. ‘I’ll be back in three months.’

His large hands continue to flick indecisively through the pages. Suddenly he looks at her. ‘Are you Jewish?’

‘Have you ever met a Jew called Gisela?’

*I almost shouted it, imitating the authoritative voice of my father who, with his big moustache and martial manner, had often been mistaken for a high-ranking officer. I, too, looked the Nazi right in the eyes. He was barely older than me. Surprised, he handed back my passport, clicked his heels, raised his right hand: ‘Heil Hitler!’ The door closed behind him; the footsteps receded.*

A few moments later the train moves off. Gisela falls back into her seat, lost in thought.

That morning she had bumped into an acquaintance who worked for the local council. It was he who warned her to leave.

The student group to which she belonged had printed a magazine that they distributed clandestinely at the university. In it they wrote critically of the new regime, and in their latest issue they had published the names of professors who had been dismissed, and described the fate of their comrade Anne, the only other girl in the group, arrested by the Gestapo while handing out the student newspaper. A few days later she was returned to her parents in a coffin.

‘No doubt she had refused to give our names, because nobody came for us. I imagined with horror the torture she must have suffered. I admired her courage and wondered if in her place I would have had the strength to resist.’

Gisela, a keen photographer, had taken a powerful series of photographs of their comrades after they were beaten by the Nazis. The head of their group, a student named Karl, said she should think about leaving.

‘Your photos should be seen abroad,’ he told her. ‘People need to know what is happening here.’

So here she is, on a night train to Paris, the photographs hidden on her body. In her camera is a second, unfinished film. What if they

open it? In a moment of panic she hurries to the train toilet, empties her camera, throws the film down the pan, places the empty Leica in her suitcase. She tries to sleep.

Outside, everything is dark. On the windows, drops of rain slide one after the other, disappearing like the tears she wished she could shed.

‘What was the point of our resistance? They had all the means to beat us. I felt suddenly exhausted and discouraged. It was cold in the train. Through my half-closed eyelids I could see the gaze of the man opposite me, silent and impenetrable.’

### *Prelude to Disaster*

Across Europe this journey is being repeated, thousands of men and women clambering onto trains headed for Vienna, Prague, Amsterdam or Paris clutching a suitcase, each one engaged in a desperate performance aimed at convincing those who might be watching them that they are just normal passengers travelling to visit an elderly aunt, or taking a much-needed holiday, or making a journey on business. Shaking hands light up cigarettes, furtive glances dart toward the window as the whistle blows for departure. Acquaintances avert their eyes, pretending not to recognize their fellow travellers.

The author Heinrich Mann, elder brother of the now more famous Thomas, is a highly visible member of the anti-Nazi opposition. The countdown to his departure begins in early February 1933 with a public appeal, signed by him – along with Albert Einstein, the artist Käthe Kollwitz and many others – urging Socialists and Communists to form a united front against the Nazis. Shortly afterwards Mann is expelled from the Academy of Arts and his Berlin flat placed under surveillance.

On 19 February Mann attends a concert, then a dinner at which the host has already packed his bags and ordered the removal van for the following day. As he leaves the party the French Ambassador

shakes the venerable author's hand. 'If you should cross Pariser Platz,' he murmurs, 'my door is always open.'

And now the moment has come. He takes only what he needs for his work. Since his partner, Nelly Kroeger, is not in any immediate danger they decide that she will stay behind to close up their apartments and settle their accounts. Having only recently taken out a lease on a new flat, Heinrich wonders at his own lack of foresight.

On 20 February, Nelly buys a train ticket to Frankfurt for the following day and checks in a small suitcase. On the morning of his departure Mann dresses with his usual attention to detail – bow tie, hat, gloves, scarf – and leaves for the station, carrying an umbrella and a briefcase. He and Nelly part as casually as possible – *Goodbye, darling! Have a wonderful trip!* – as if he is popping off to one of his conferences. Nelly waves him off on the platform, then she is left alone.

Two days later, Heinrich Mann crosses the Rhine into Strasbourg. On the same day, police arrive at his flat on Fasanenstrasse. They search the apartment, loot it and boast that the famous author has been arrested. Luckily, Mann's friends have already removed his desk, chair, books and numerous other items. The rest will be claimed by his landlord in lieu of unpaid rent.

He travels on to Toulon, where he is met by a friend. The idea of exile in the south of France is not such a terrible one for an author who has just embarked on a historical novel about the sixteenth-century French monarch Henri IV. Mann is fluent in French, steeped in the country's history and culture. If his long-suffering partner can sort out their finances, at least he will not have to worry too much about the practicalities of survival.

Poor Nelly: she is ill-equipped to deal with what her dearest Heinrich has left behind. After his departure she spends weeks fighting to extract money from a bank that will only recognize his name on the account; he rarely writes, and meanwhile she is fending off visits from the Gestapo from which she is saved only by the fact that her brother has recently joined the SS.

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