

WE'LL ALWAYS HAVE PARIS!

J E A N N E F U C H S

Left Bank: Art, Passion, and the Rebirth of Paris, 1940–1950

by Agnès Poirier

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FORTUNATELY, FOR THE WORLD: “WE’LL ALWAYS HAVE PARIS,” turns out to be a correct utterance. This celebrated line, from a celebrated film spoken by an equally celebrated actor, reverberates across the decades as one reads Agnès Poirier’s riveting account of Paris during the Nazi Occupation, through its liberation, and the aftermath of both.

While the title of Agnès Poirier’s book focuses on a specific part of Paris, the Left Bank, it is fair to say that Poirier employs metonymy to signify what is clearly meant to show the part that makes the whole: the intellectual heart of the great city that the civilized world came close to losing in the final days of World War II.

If Adolf Hitler’s hysterical, angry order to blow up all the bridges in the city, most of its famous monuments, and to burn Paris to the ground had not been defied by General Dietrich von Choltitz, indeed, the conflagration of one of the crown jewels of western civilization would have succeeded.

A detailed map of the Left Bank, which indicates the exact locations of apartments, hotels, studios, and offices of the main characters in the drama, a chronology of the important dates from 1939–1949, and an extensive list of the players (32) French, American, German, British, Swiss and Irish, enable the reader to follow the many levels of complexity (political, social, strategic, artistic) that envelop the ten-year period under scrutiny. Like Ariadne, Poirier guides the reader through the labyrinth with skill and a dash of magic.

Although the author provides a panoramic view of the city and the key

figures in the drama, she has singled out the leading actors carefully, and weaves them into her tapestry from start to finish, never losing sight of their individual and collective contributions to the period that shaped French intellectual and artistic history and indelibly marked the mid to late 20th century as a period of intense political and intellectual ferment. Not surprisingly, three of the stars in the firmament are French: Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus, and Jean-Paul Sartre, another is Hungarian, Arthur Koestler (later a naturalized British citizen). In important supporting roles are Janet Flanner, Samuel Beckett, Richard Wright, Jacques Jaujard, Pablo Picasso, and Henri Cartier-Bresson. There remain also numerous cameos namely by American writers who went to Paris after the war, some on the GI bill: Saul Bellow, Art Buchwald, Norman Mailer, and others.

Poirier deftly builds tension in the retelling of the Herculean efforts, in the late summer of 1939, of Jacques Jaujard, the Director of the Louvre, and his staff to *move* the entire collection from the museum to châteaux and other safe havens throughout the country. The Louvre was closed for three days while 200 staff members crated up over 4,000 treasures that were secretly spirited away from the capital. The removal of the Winged Victory, the last piece to go, produces nail-biting moments worthy of Alfred Hitchcock. Jaujard and his group of motivated patriots must be counted among the first heroes of pre-Occupation Paris. Their selfless, collaborative effort saved not only some of the most precious works of art in the world, but also the pride of an entire country. Later, Jaujard supplied the Allied forces with detailed maps of where the art treasures were located. Thus, preventing any “collateral damage” from Allied bombings. France declared war on Germany on September 3, 1939.

Poirier packs urgency into her recounting of the rapidity of the events leading up to the Occupation of Paris: German tanks roll into Belgium and northern France on May 10, 1940; by June 14, 1940 the German army enters Paris, and the heart-breaking photo opportunity of the century occurs when Hitler appears in Paris on June 23, 1940. Only the day before, Jean-Paul Sartre and the photographer, Henri Cartier-Bresson were imprisoned in a camp in Germany.

The Occupation of Paris, which lasted for four years, brought intense intellectual and political activity along with much suffering and deprivation. Rationing of food and fuel combined with the harsh weather meant that most of Paris was hungry and cold for extended periods. In addition, peo-

ple disappeared, were arrested, or went into hiding. Nonetheless, Beauvoir, Sartre, who managed to escape from the German camp, and Camus remained in place on the left bank and became increasingly *engagés* in all aspects of resistance including the Résistance. Their political, philosophical, and artistic writings flowed from them like water from a mountain stream, uniting and inspiring Frenchmen and foreigners alike. After it was over, Sartre wrote, not unexpectedly, given the tenets of Existentialism: “We never were freer than during the German occupation. Since the Nazi venom was poisoning our own freedom, every free thought was a victory.”

Beauvoir and Sartre incarnate the archetypal existential couple; they remain authentic to themselves and one another during the entire period and after. In their early twenties, they had made a pact in which they acknowledged the “essential” nature of their relationship and the “contingent” nature of all other relationships. As products of the bourgeoisie, they were determined to reject all efforts—social, political, or religious—to restrict their freedom. Their pact set them free to have any liaisons they wished but never to marry or have children. One proviso of the pact was that they would tell each other every detail of other relationships with no subterfuge, no lying, no bourgeois bad faith. They kept the pact not only during the war and the occupation, but also for their entire lives.

By contrast, many of their closest friends and allies, Camus, Koestler, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Picasso, and many expatriates were embroiled in complex webs of desire, deception, and ultimate unhappiness. Poirier examines effectively the comings and goings of mistresses, wives, and assorted lovers among the group. The subtitle of her book, “art, passion and the rebirth of Paris,” is underscored here. Art and passion, combined with persistent peril, are analyzed in depth. Poirier links the examination of these complex relationships with Beauvoir’s ground-breaking study, *The Second Sex*, in which she delineates many of the behaviors, not innate, but rather instilled in women, to train them to behave in ways designated by men—ways designed to keep them forever “objects” and never “subjects.”

The German occupation dwindled with the liberation of Paris on August 24, 1944; V-E Day on May 8, 1945 marked the true liberation of France and western Europe. Rationing and scarcity continued but spirits were lifted and the real work of rebuilding the country began. The intellectuals on the Left Bank shifted into high gear and took off with a surge of energy and creativity. Sartre and Beauvoir founded *Les Temps modernes* (named for Charlie

Chaplin's film), the first issue included Richard Wright's short story, "Fire and Cloud." Wright feeling more and more oppressed at the end of the war, pulled up stakes in Brooklyn and took his family to Paris. Camus as editor of *Combat*, asked Sartre and later Beauvoir to go on a tour of the United States to write copy for his review. Beauvoir and Sartre both loved American movies, jazz, literature, and pop art. Their experiences were positive but they both remarked on the lack of serious conversation among Americans: Beauvoir noted that "parties are a social obligation where nothing meaningful is said" and she bemoaned the "overabundance" of everything in the States. In terms of education, she posited that "America produces specialists but does not train and shape minds."

Sartre enjoyed himself completely in the U.S. while remaining suspicious of American capitalism. He stated in an interview: "Two phrases only are necessary for a whole evening of English conversation, I have found: 'Scotch and soda'; and 'Why not?' By alternating them, it is impossible to make mistakes."

Albert Camus, on the other hand, was baffled by the United States. His diary entries are telling and include, "... large consumption of scotches and soda in the cultural milieu; the luxury and bad taste, especially in neckties, the love of animals; the habit of drinking fruit juice in the morning; millions of windows lit up at night; hot baths; vitamins; drugstores serving bacon and eggs." When he wrote for *Les Temps modernes*, he noted "... men chased within the heart of their conformist happiness by a nameless obscure malaise. Those men are tragic precisely because they fear to be tragic, because they lack tragedy in and around them." Bear in mind that these observations were made just after WWII.

Poirier has many snapshots and vignettes of American writers in Paris. Among the most fascinating is one of the young Norman Mailer, in Paris on the GI Bill with his wife Bea. Mailer was not yet famous; he had submitted *The Naked and the Dead* to his publisher before sailing for Paris and received the news of its huge success while traveling back to France from Italy with his mother, sister, and wife. It was the end of anonymity for him, but the beginning of a spectacular career as writer and enlightened citizen. Poirier traces Mailer's first encounter with Jean Malaquais, the writer who was to become Mailer's mentor, translator, and confidant over the years.

Saul Bellow appears as an angry, almost anti-French visitor when he first arrives in Paris. He has a chip on his shoulder and loses it only after consid-

erable emersion in the culture. On the other hand, Art Buchwald and Theodore White adore Paris from the first moment they step onto French soil. They are both painted as excited and exciting writers who find a perfect fit with the location.

For the Existential triumvirate of Beauvoir, Camus, and Sartre, helping their government find a way through the aftermath of war and occupation was not an easy task. They wanted to find a “third way” that is an alternative to either the Communist Party on the left and the Gaullists on the right. It proved to be a Sisyphean chore. Similarly, Janet Flanner (aka Genêt) had hoped to find a “third sex”; she envisioned: “... a sex not dominated by muscle or an inclination to breed.”

Poirier weaves together some of the most practical ideas with some of the funniest. Her narrative is chock-a-block with intriguing and talented people. Her story is vivid—written with élan and grace. Anyone who had ever gone to Paris or wanted to go because of its great cultural heritage and the originality and resourcefulness of its writers, most particularly the Existentialists, will be bowled over by her “time-restricted” story. In her desire to include a cast as big as the chorus of *Aida*, she sometimes makes abrupt transitions (for example, jumping from the trial and conviction of Maréchal Henri Pétain to Alexander Calder in Connecticut welding an iron piece for an exhibit in Paris). Overall, she has masterfully organized letters, documents, novels, short stories, poems, and biographical information in a manner that does not slow the narrative or seem intrusive. The *Left Bank* is a tour de force of style and organization.

Best of all, because of the ten-year period of history that Poirier has chosen to focus on, when the curtain falls, the main characters are all in good health, at the height of their powers—in the prime of life. No decay is in sight and no horrific, absurd accidents have occurred. Her lyrical final paragraph (modeled on an Irwin Shaw passage) attests to the soft resolution of the narrative. *Merci et salut* Agnès!