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THE

PARIS

APARTMENT

READING GROUP GUIDE



FOREVER

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

*The Paris Apartment* is a work of fiction. While a product of my imagination, the premises and characters I've chosen to create are inspired by real people and real events. The characters of Sophie Seymour and Estelle Allard were shaped by the experiences and courage of Virginia Hall, Pearl Witherington Cornioley, Christine Granville, Josephine Baker, Nancy Wake, and Andrée de Jongh. Their memoirs, interviews, and stories only give us an idea of how truly extraordinary each of these women was.

Sophie's work at Bletchley Park was based on the real men and women who worked tirelessly against time and almost impossible odds to decode Nazi encryption devices. Most of us have heard of the Enigma cipher and the remarkable work by Alan Turing and his team to break that cipher. Told less often seems to be the story of Tommy Flowers and Bill Tutte, who, together with their teams, developed Colossus—the machine that was able to break the Lorenz cipher, known as Tunny at Bletchley.

The Lorenz cipher was favoured by Hitler and used by High Command—and for good reason. It was a far more powerful than the Enigma and capable of exceedingly complex encryptions. Additionally, unlike the Enigma, it did not depend

on Morse code. Attached to a teleprinter, it automatically encrypted outgoing messages and decrypted incoming messages, allowing longer messages to be transmitted with greater ease. Each of the links between Nazi command posts was given a name by Bletchley—the Paris–Berlin link was referred to as Jellyfish.

There is no evidence that there was ever a Lorenz machine installed in the Ritz Hotel in Paris—that is pure imagination on my part. However, there is certainly evidence that the Nazis housed cipher machines in other hotels and buildings used as headquarters. An objective of the disastrous 1942 Dieppe assault may have been to capture coding/cipher technology at the Hotel Moderne, according to author David O'Keefe. Knowing that the Paris Ritz Hotel served as the headquarters of the Luftwaffe and was the residence of Hermann Göring (who was tapped as the successor to Hitler), a need for a direct, protected line of communication to the Führer seemed plausible for this work of fiction.

There is also no evidence that Bletchley Park ever received any intelligence from SOE operatives such as photos, code-books, or even sketches of the Lorenz machine. Declassified documents from the Target Intelligence Committee (TICOM), which was a joint operation between the U.K. and the U.S. targeting the capture of German signals intelligence organizations, provide the first Allied description of a captured, intact, Tunny communications train, but not until 1945, long after D-Day. Nazi Field Marshal Albert Kesselring's captured "Fish Train" included six German trucks housing Tunny machines, radio transmitters, receivers, and encryption devices. Each truck contained two bunks for the driver and assistant, who

operated the equipment. Tutte and his team did not have the benefit of this information at Bletchley. All the decryption work done was the product of an astonishing feat of reverse engineering.

The first Colossus machine, developed by Flowers, was operational by December 1943, allowing the Allies to intercept and decode critical information leading up to and after D-Day. For this story, however, I chose to imagine that Bletchley and its brilliant minds might have had a helping hand.

The Paris Ritz Hotel, with its socialites and industrialists, collaborators and spies (and, yes, hidden cupboards and stairways), remained the glamorous headquarters of the Luftwaffe throughout the war. The Charles Le Brun painting *The Sacrifice of Polyxena* (currently hanging in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) that I have used in this book was, in fact, discovered hidden in plain sight in the luxurious Coco Chanel suite prior to the hotel's recent renovation. The provenance for this painting before its discovery in the hotel remains unknown. The current theory is that when Cesar Ritz purchased the *hôtel particulier* at No. 15, Place Vendôme, once the home of princes and dukes, the Le Brun canvas was already hanging within. I chose a different history for this painting.

Other events that serve as a backdrop for this story that will be familiar are the bombing of Weiluń, Poland, in September of 1939, where I imagined Piotr was killed, and the Vél' d'Hiv' Roundup in July of 1942, where Rachel and her family members are taken. The objectives of the Luftwaffe bombing of the small and nonmilitary town of Weiluń, arguably the first major act of World War II, are not entirely clear. Some

historians have suggested that the Germans received reports of the presence of Polish cavalry, like Piotr's character, in the vicinity of the town, but others disagree.

Regardless of motive, beginning in the early morning of September 1, the Luftwaffe dropped 46,000 kilograms of bombs on civilian targets, including the clearly marked hospital. There are also numerous accounts of the Luftwaffe strafing fleeing civilians. The timing of the initial bombing is a subject of debate, with Polish sources marking the first run at 4:30–4:40 a.m., while German records show the first run beginning at 5:40 a.m. For the purposes of this novel, I have used the German military records.

There is no debate, however, on the timing of the 1942 Vél' d'Hiv' Roundup, which began at 4:00 a.m. on July 16, 1942. Over 13,000 Jews were arrested by French police, more than 4,000 of them children. The majority of those arrested were held at the Vélodrome d'Hiver or other internment camps before being deported by cattle car to Auschwitz, though there are numerous stories of individuals hidden by friends or neighbours or who managed to escape arrest.

One of these courageous people who helped Jewish children escape occupied France altogether was the Frenchman Georges Loinger, whose creative methods of getting children out of France and into Switzerland included dressing up his charges as mourners and leading them through a cemetery located along the Swiss border. Aviva's journey out of France in this novel is based loosely on Loinger's efforts.

Lastly, the network of men and women whom Estelle and Jerome were a part of was based on the very real Comet Line. This resistance organization operated in occupied

Belgium and France and helped Allied airmen and soldiers evade capture and return to Britain. An estimated 3,000 civilians assisted the Comet Line by hiding or escorting Allied airmen, and up to seventy percent of these helpers were women.

# QUESTIONS FOR READERS

1. The theft and destruction of art is only one of many crimes perpetrated by the Nazis during World War II. What impact do you think this loss has on individual families who cannot rightfully claim or recover property? What significance does the loss of art have on society today? Do you understand why many people risked their lives during WWII to save artworks?
2. Was Lia right or wrong to display Gabriel's art in the exhibition without him knowing? What do you think convinced Gabriel to finally claim his work as his own?
3. Estelle had a very solitary childhood and adolescence, independent from her parents. Similarly, Lia lives a life separate from her immediate family. Do you think lifestyles follow families through generations?
4. Many Parisians who patronized the Ritz, including Coco Chanel, collaborated in some manner with the occupying Nazis. Were they right or wrong to do so? Do you

think it was a matter of survival? Or do you think it was the opportunity to further themselves that some took advantage of?

5. Why do you think Sophie told Estelle about some of her personal life? How isolated do you think both Sophie and Estelle felt when they met each other? What do you think drove their partnership?
6. Many characters hide their identities throughout the novel. Sophie hides that she is British, the airmen hide that they are American and Canadian, and even Estelle hides that she speaks German. Are there identities and opinions that you hide in your daily life? Why do you feel the need to do so? Do you think that many Jewish people still feel like they should hide their faith today?
7. So many of the characters appreciate art and art history: Estelle, of course, because she grew up with valuable paintings, but also Gabriel and his grandfather because they create art, and even young Aviva who loves Degas's ballerinas. Do you appreciate art? What kind and from what time period?
8. What does the attitude toward working women in the story tell us about gender norms in the 1930s and 1940s? Sophie's fellow spy Gerard is arguably the most overtly sexist character but what other characters discriminate against women? Were you at all surprised by the lack of or amount of freedom these women were granted?

9. As Estelle became more and more invested in her work with the French Resistance, did you feel that she changed in any way? How were those changes apparent through her interactions with others? Do you think these changes would make it harder for her to have a successful relationship with Jerome?
10. Did you feel that Estelle's violin was an important symbol in the book? How did Estelle feel about the damaged violin? Why did she keep it?
11. The historical WWII setting allows us to explore many themes such as race relations, political resistance, and struggling to survive. How are these themes relevant to current events today? Do you think there have been meaningful improvements since the 1930s and 1940s? Do you think there will be a future time when these issues will be resolved for most people?
12. Estelle and Sophie resist the Nazis in very different ways. Sophie reacts with anger and defiance, risking her life to spy for the Resistance. Estelle proceeds with calm and caution, avoiding extreme risks for the sake of Aviva and the airmen she hides. Which one do you admire or relate to or sympathize with more? Who is more heroic in your opinion?
13. Did the book give you a better understanding of life during the Nazi occupation in Paris? Did you know that the Nazis took over the Ritz Hotel during the war? Have

you visited Paris? If not, would you like to go? And if so, what would you like to see while you are there?

14. Were you able to visualize the glamorous settings of Estelle's apartment and Millbrook Hall in lifelike detail? Would you prefer a life in Estelle's urban apartment or in Gabriel's ancestral home? In a film adaptation of the book, what actors would you cast as Estelle, Sophie, Gabriel, and Lia?
  
15. Did you cry while reading this book? Which scene moved you the most? Which character's fate would you say was the most tragic? What will you remember the most about *The Paris Apartment*?

## FURTHER READING

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NW32823—*Demonstration of Kesselring's "Fish Train"* (TICOM/M-5, July 8, 1945).

NW32823/Appendix 7. *Transportation of O.B. West Non-Morse Station (Jellyfish) With Attached Personnel.* (TICOM/M-5, July 8, 1945).