

Suite Française by Irène Némirovsky.
Chatto and Windus 2006

The life story of the author of *Suite Française* is another one of those mindless tragedies inflicted by Nazism on the Jews of Europe; human tragedies which, in her case, have added poignancy because of the discovery of a long-forgotten, unfinished literary masterpiece whose hope of completion perished with its creator in Auschwitz in 1942.

Suite Française is divided into two parts, the first parts of what would have been a sweeping historical novel on the scale of *War and Peace*. The first, *Storm in June*, describes the activities of a large number of Parisians fleeing their capital in advance of the arrival of the Wehrmacht; it describes with credibility and the utmost power the panic and upheaval of leaving home, the fear of what the Germans would do when they arrived, and then the chaos and anarchy that ensued on the roads as the Parisians tried to flee using any means at their disposal. It is a story of what ensues when all the norms governing life are ripped away and the survival instinct takes over, and the characters through whose experience this is expressed are vivid, credible and strong.

The second part, *Dolce*, which involves many of the same characters of *Storm in June*, details the new lives of the Parisians who have put down temporary roots in the country and then have to deal with the German forces as they complete their conquest of a compliant France. For the 21st century reader who knows what happened after 1942 the seeds of that future may be discerned in the story, seeds of both collaboration and resistance, as well as the cruelty and arbitrary nature of the Occupation.

Suite Française is an amazing work, made even more so by the fact that it was written by the author in the country rather than the capital, and facing an uncertain future whose outcome, for her and her family, was to be of the most tragic kind. It has depth and an incredible perspective, and in many ways says as much about the experience of France during the Second World War as do many academic histories. It is also worth noting that the author, a Jew herself, and Russian by birth, writes solely as a French woman not as a Jew, adding extra poignancy to the text in view of her fate.

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