



Doors to Madame Marie (McLellan Endowed Series)

Odette Meyers

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This eloquent and spirited memoir of a young Jewish girl's coming of age in Nazi-occupied France recounts her own family's difficult and brave survival and portrays as well the love and quiet heroism of her rescuers. A powerful central figure is Madame Marie Chotel, the Catholic concierge and seamstress who hides seven-year-old Odette and her mother in her broom closet while police search, who secures the child's safe haven in a distant province, and who is cherished by Odette, even in absentia, as her godmother and mentor.

The story unfolds as a drama of many parts, told in a lyrical prose rich with flashes of humor and a startling perceptivity that takes nothing for granted. Odette is hidden during the occupation, a secret Jew in a remote and conservative Catholic village. Absorbed in the village's life, she becomes a fervent Catholic child. When she returns to Paris, she struggles over her Jewish identity and religion and her fierce nostalgia for the wild countryside, but she accepts again the secular Judaism of her working-class intellectual parents, immigrants from Poland who survived the war (though many relatives did not), her father as a French Army prisoner of war, her mother as a member of the Resistance. And she again finds Madame Marie, who tells her, simply, to look in her heart. "The world can be confusing, maddening, and a whole city, a whole country can vanish from one's life but as long as Madame Marie sits at her sewing machine, everything can be made right again."

The story does not close with the war's end and the departure of fourteen-year-old Odette and her parents for America. It continues with her search, many years later, for Madame Marie, and with the inscription of the name of Marie Chotel on the Wall of Righteous Gentiles at the Holocaust Memorial in Washington, D.C. This memoir is extraordinary not only for its broad historic sensibility but for its fascinating portrait of wartime France from the unusual perspective of a Jew whose life was permitted to go on.

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