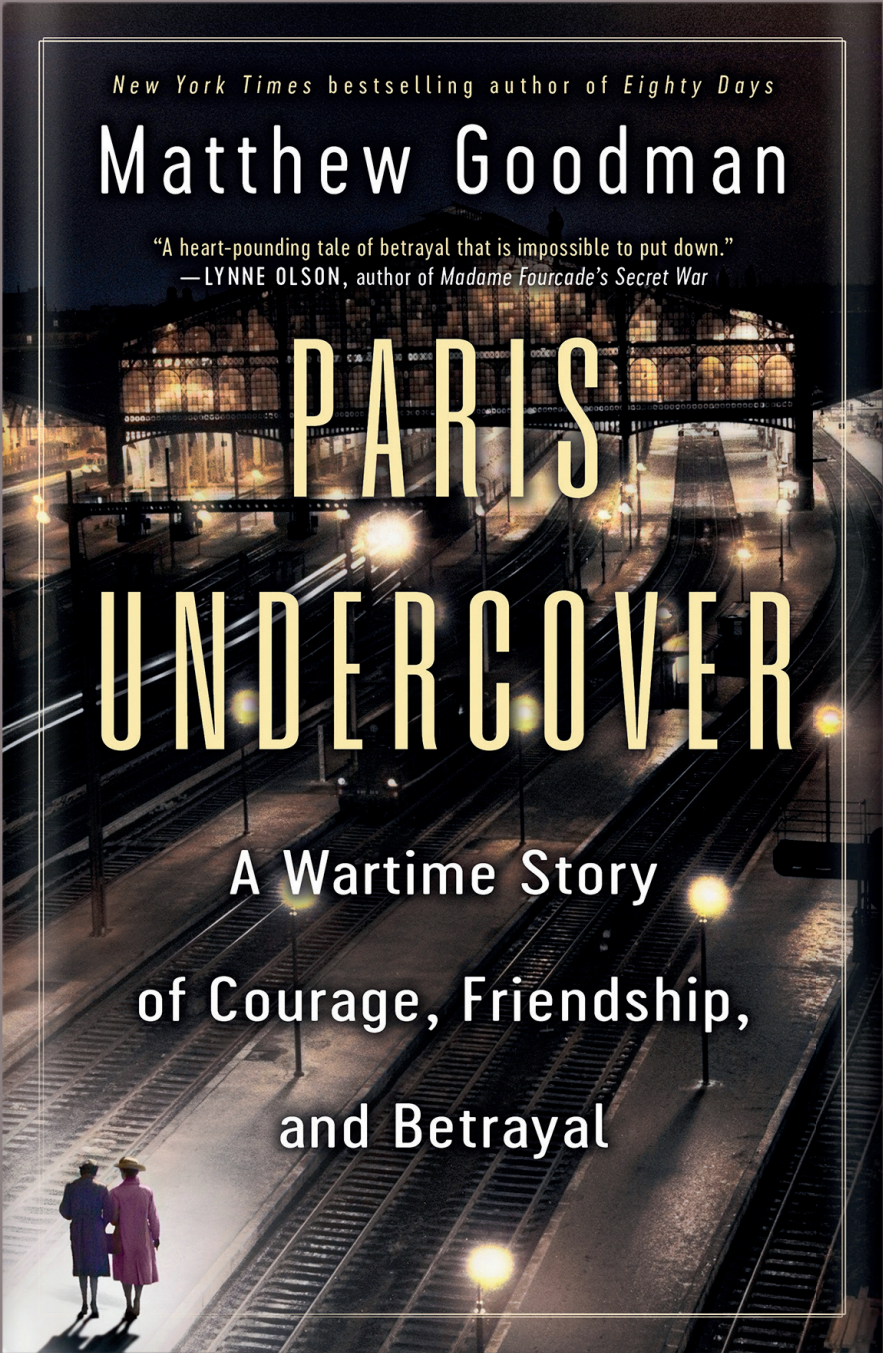


New York Times bestselling author of *Eighty Days*

Matthew Goodman

"A heart-pounding tale of betrayal that is impossible to put down."
—LYNNE OLSON, author of *Madame Fourcade's Secret War*



PARIS
UNDERCOVER

A Wartime Story
of Courage, Friendship,
and Betrayal

BOOK CLUB KIT

AUTHOR LETTER

In his short story “The Leather Man,” the novelist E. L. Doctorow wrote of “individuals in whom history intensifies like electroshock.” Though it’s a bit of a tossed-off phrase in the story, I was struck very powerfully when I first read it, because I felt that it somehow captured the entirety of my project as a narrative historian. In a sense, what I’m always trying to do is to find and then think as deeply as I can about individuals who get caught up in historical events and have to negotiate their way through them; that’s the central theme to which I seem to return again and again in my work.

So it’s no real surprise, I suppose, that I was immediately captivated, some years ago, when I came upon the story of Etta Shiber in a magazine article. Shiber, I discovered, was a deeply shy, sheltered housewife from New York City who had moved to Paris in 1937 after her husband died, to live with a close friend, an Englishwoman named Kate Bonnefous. In June of 1940, like thousands of other Parisians, the two women had taken to the road in the face of the oncoming Nazi armies. That evening, stopping at a café in Orléans, they encountered a fleeing RAF pilot by the name of William Gray; impulsively, the woman decided to hide William Gray in the trunk of their car and transport him back to their apartment, where they might figure out a way to deliver him into unoccupied France. Thus began Kate and Etta’s escape line, purely improvisatory at first but ultimately successful beyond their wildest dreams: In the course of just a few months, until they were arrested by the Gestapo, the two women were said to have transported more than 150 Allied servicemen to safety.

At the time, I was searching for a subject for my next book—for me, always the most grueling and anxiety-producing part of the nonfiction writing process—and I was drawn to the idea of these two older women, living rather conventional lives, who unexpectedly found themselves plunged into the whirlwind of history. Not only was the story intrinsically dramatic, full of suspenseful cat-and-mouse incidents between the women and their Nazi pursuers, but it seemed to offer an opportunity to explore how individuals choose to respond when faced with growing authoritarianism and deepening social injustice—an issue, unhappily enough, that holds particular meaning for our own historical moment.

My interest in Etta Shiber’s story only increased when I read her 1943 memoir *Paris-Underground*. It was everything one might want in a memoir: it was fast paced, gripping, and beautifully written, full of the sort of sensory details that bring the world of the characters strongly to life. One of my earlier books, *Eighty Days: Nellie Bly and Elizabeth Bisland’s History-Making Race Around the World*, had likewise featured two female protagonists; as it happens, Bly and Bisland had each written a memoir of her circumnavigation, and I had found those books especially useful, in that they provided me a kind of map not just of the external landscape of the race, but the *internal* landscape as well—a vivid sense of what each of the travelers had been thinking and feeling as she made her way around the world. Now, setting out on this new writing project, I had every confidence that Etta Shiber’s memoir could serve much the same purpose. (If anything, I worried that I would come to depend too heavily on the memoir, and that my own book would prove to be little more than a gloss on the original.)

Other than Shiber herself, *Paris-Underground* gave pseudonyms to all of the major characters, and so my first task as a historian was to learn their real-life identities. A major break came

AUTHOR LETTER

when a researcher in the military archives in Caen, France, unearthed a folder containing the original German-language judgment for Kate and Etta's Nazi military tribunal; it included the names and professions of all eight defendants in the case. As I delved deeper into the story, I managed to ascertain the identities of most of the fleeing British servicemen who had passed through the women's apartment on rue Balny-d'Avricourt—with one significant exception. I simply could not find any information about "William Gray" (that name, too, was a pseudonym), the RAF pilot said to have been rescued by Kate and Etta during their exodus from Paris. I searched newspaper accounts, escaped-prisoner testimonies, military histories such as Oliver Clutton-Brock's magisterial *RAF Evaders*: still all my efforts came up empty.

Over time, William Gray, this sturdy, genial figure in blue-gray pilot's uniform and leather jacket, became a kind of ghostly presence haunting my story. How, I wondered, could I write a historical account of Etta and Kate's escape line when I knew nothing about the man whose very existence had brought it into being?

As the months passed, I found myself wondering if I wasn't pursuing a kind of fool's errand—if, in fact, this ghost had never existed as a man. My doubts crystallized after one of Etta's family members passed on to me a packet of letters that Etta had written back home to her brother and sister-in-law in the months immediately before and after the German occupation of Paris. Etta was a diligent and faithful letter writer, and these letters (which included a detailed account of the two women's flight from Paris in the face of the Nazi occupation) made it clear that the encounter with William Gray in the Orléans café could not have taken place—indeed, had not taken place. Which meant that the ensuing scene, in which Etta quick-thinkingly saves William Gray from a Gestapo search by dressing him up as her late brother Irving, had not taken place either. Nor could the women have placed a classified ad in a Paris newspaper using William Gray's name to reach out to other British servicemen in hiding; that explained why my search of the major Paris newspapers of the time had not turned up any such advertisement. And if there was no advertisement, then the women could not have received a letter of response from a priest in the northern village of Conchy-sur-Canche. And so on.

I knew, of course, that the general outlines of the story were true: Every historical source confirmed that Etta Shiber and Kate Bonnefous had sheltered escaped Allied servicemen, had been arrested by the Gestapo, had spent much of the war in Nazi prisons. Yet the precipitating event of the narrative, the most suspenseful incident in the book—the one that had been mentioned in every review, had been excerpted in *Reader's Digest*, and which I myself had highlighted in my own book proposal—was now off limits to me, as was, apparently, much else of *Paris-Underground*. Where once I had worried about depending too much on Etta's memoir, now I faced a situation in which I couldn't depend on it at all.

One day I was discussing the problem with a writer friend of mine, who mentioned that in graduate school she had taken a course taught by none other than E. L. Doctorow; during one of the workshop sessions, Doctorow had advised his students that if they ever found a hole in their narrative—a plot gap that they found themselves unable to bridge—they shouldn't try to hide it from their readers. "Don't run away from the hole," he told them. "Point to it."

AUTHOR LETTER

Now, Doctorow was speaking specifically about fiction writing, but as a narrative historian I try to approach my books much as a novelist does, always keeping in mind issues such as character development, narrative structure, authorial voice, and so forth. Although at first I didn't grasp exactly what he had been getting at, I was intrigued by the counter-intuitive nature of the observation (why should a writer alert a reader to what is seemingly a problem in the story?), and I began to contemplate how I might apply it to my own stalled writing project. Eventually it occurred to me that the question of what was true and untrue in Etta's account—and more to the point, why so much of it had been fictionalized—was actually a significant part of the story. Indeed, there could be no understanding the full import of Etta and Kate's courageous work together without coming to grips with what had happened afterward, with the publication of Etta's bestselling memoir in 1943.

With that, the structure of my book fell into place: three linked sections, each with its own distinct narrative voice, each relating a different part of Kate and Etta's story, including how and why *Paris-Underground* had come to be written. I had initially set out to write a kind of adventure story—and fortunately, there was plenty of adventure to be found in the women's real-life activities, even without the Hitchcockian escapades featuring the fictional William Gray—but, in the end, the story that emerged was larger, more complicated, and I think much more interesting: a story of daring and courage, to be sure, but also one of friendship, and betrayal, and divided loyalties, and the damage of unintended consequences. I didn't anticipate—couldn't have, really—any of that when I first set to work; as has been true of all my books, the manuscript that I finally turned in was markedly different from the one that I started out to write.

For the narrative historian, of course, the essential tools of the trade lie not in one's own imaginative powers but in the external materials loosely (sometimes even misleadingly) grouped together under the label of *fact*: books, testimonies, photos, maps, letters, newspaper articles, archival records, and the like. Still, as with any creative process, there is always an element of imagination at work: Much like a fiction writer, the historian must follow where the story leads, rather than clinging to inadequate ideas or some preconceived structure that might not prove to be the most revelatory one. Sometimes, as often happens in writing a novel, a seemingly minor character may thrust herself out of the crowd, demanding that greater attention be paid; sometimes the authorial voice needs to be altered, perhaps through a shift of tense or an alternate point of view; and sometimes, as here, the writer has to stop trying to hide a hole in the narrative and instead point to it.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. First, a show of hands: Who among you already knew the history of the Nazi occupation of Paris before reading this book? How, if at all, did *Paris Undercover* affect or alter your understanding of this dark chapter in world history?
2. Author Matthew Goodman puts a human face on World War II by bringing the character of Etta Shiber to life. Talk about the storytelling techniques he used to create action and suspense—and to keep you turning the pages. How did Goodman transform Etta’s real-life experiences into a work of nonfiction that reads like a novel?
3. Take a moment to discuss your reading preferences and expectations. Would you rather read a true, first-person account of a particular event or era versus a fictional one? Why or why not?
4. Discuss the significance of Etta’s own memoir, *Paris-Underground*. How do you think its existence shaped Goodman’s understanding of Etta’s humanity and activism? You may wish to take a moment to imagine, and discuss, the fact that Kate Bonnefous was unaware of its publication and reception as well.
5. What made Etta Shiber and Kate Bonnefous unlikely heroines during the Nazi occupation of Paris? How, if at all, did their personal histories—their desires, humanity, activism—resonate with you?
6. Etta was an American Jew who became a supporter of the Ethical Culture Society; Kate was an Englishwoman whose father and brother were members of Masonic organizations, and who gave birth to her son out of wedlock. Talk about how each woman’s identity influenced her actions and shaped her fate.
7. Etta and Kate demonstrated extraordinary courage and resilience in the face of danger and imprisonment. What did you learn about the role of women in resistance efforts during World War II? This might be a good opportunity to share your own stories about any women (or men) in your own life who served or offered support during that war, or during more recent conflicts, as well.
8. If you had a chance to meet Etta and/or Kate, and ask each of them one question, what might it be?

LETTER

This is the first page of the long handwritten letter that Etta Shiber sent to Kate Bonnefous near the end of the Second World War. Etta had just learned that her dear friend Kitty was still alive, after three years in Nazi prisons—"That you were able to survive," she wrote, "is a miracle."

ALFRED ONKEN
PROPRIETOR

TELEPHONE
ROSCOE 61-F11

THE RIVERVIEW
ROSCOE, NEW YORK

August 10, 1945

My dearest Kitty I
What a Thrill I had when
I received word that you have
come through the frightful ordeal. I
don't know what you went through,
but having spent eighteen months in
prison myself, I can imagine. At the
end of this period, I had developed
such a severe heart condition that I
was given six months to go
to Paris and be made well. The
condition was very high blood pressure
which is greatly relieved and though
it can never be entirely cured, I am
not dipping of it as yet. So you see
I am in the Country and shall be
in some time to come. That you
were able to survive is a miracle
but I was always sure that you would.

TRANSCRIPT

My dearest Kitty—

What a thrill I had when I received word that you have come through the frightful ordeal. I don't know what you went through, but have spent eighteen months in prison myself, I can imagine. At the end of this period, I had developed such a severe heart condition that I was given six months parole, to go to Paris and be made well! The condition was very high blood pressure which is greatly relieved and though it can never be entirely cured, I am not dying of it as yet. As you see I am in the country and shall be for some time to come. That you were able to survive is a miracle but I was always sure that you would until I heard of the dreadful atrocities that the Germans were inflicting on prisoners. I confess that I had my doubts, for the human being can stand just so much. But I consoled myself with the idea that in the concentration camps it was, perhaps, worse than in prison. I am wondering what it has done to you. I too lost everything—it was all confiscated after our trial and I came back with almost no money and no clothes, except a few rags that were given to me. There is much that I would like to talk to you about but which I am not able to write about at length. The long term of imprisonment, with all the hardships both physical and mental, did something to me and has made it almost impossible to write a long letter. I was exchanged for that Nazi spy Johanna Hoffman who was coiffeuse on the Bremen. If you recall, we saw a movie of her story in Nice called 'The Confessions of a Nazi Spy.' I sailed for home from Lisbon and the first moment of security I felt was when I stepped on American soil.

I wrote to [Sonny.] during my brief stay in Paris when I knew I was coming home. But I had no reply from him. Now I'm wondering whether they were able to keep and feed Winkie during those terrible years and if she is still alive, whether she knew you. Micky I was obliged to leave behind me with the concierge next door. It nearly broke my heart, but I was not sure how I was to going to travel. As it turned out, it was best for her, for it took us 3 days to get to Lisbon instead of the usual 44 hours. It was a sealed train and the crew was Gestapo in plain clothes. We were held up at Hendaye for 24 hours until the train containing the German Diplomatic Corps came through. Then we were allowed to proceed. It would take hours to tell you all details and if I hear from you, as I hope I will, I will write more in detail.

I was so happy to hear that you are alive and I hope to hear that you are well. So, do write and tell me how things are going and whether you have read my book 'Paris—Underground.' It has been made into a movie which is to be released on September 14—your part is taken by Constance Bennet, mine by Gracie Fields. But it has been so changed that all you will recognize is the title.

So much for now. My love and I am so grateful that you have come through.

Always lovingly,

Etta