

The French Girl's War



Herb Williams-Dalgart

Acclaim for The French Girl's War

“*The French Girl's War* is a novel of hope and determination that lights up a dark place in human history. A generous humanity fills the pages of this book. As readers, we can't help worrying about Sophie, yet with her fortitude and grit—and with the hope she inspires—we believe in her. We know she won't rest until goodness prevails.”

—Paula Cizmar,
Award-winning playwright, author, and screenwriter

“Set early in World War II, this novel charms with its depictions of French village life and its vivid, quirky characters. But don't be misled. The ravages and cruelties of war come calling, forcing eighteen-year-old ingenue Sophie to abandon her dreams of an artistic life—and forging in her a new necessity for courage and fierceness. Sophie is the perfect heroine for the reader who loves to live, for a time, with greatness.”

—Louella Nelson,
Best-selling author

Copyright © 2014 Herb Williams-Dalgart
All rights reserved.

ISBN-13: 9781493570881
ISBN-10: 1493570889
Library of Congress Control Number: 2013920027
CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform
North Charleston, South Carolina

*To my darling, Maggie—your bravery is boundless. You married a writer without knowing
what you were in for.*

Acknowledgements

Like my protagonist, Sophie, I have been fortunate in my friends, family, and supporters, to whom I remain eternally grateful.

My mentors are numerous and diverse, but of particular importance are Paula Cizmar and Louella Nelson, both gifted writers, each impressive in what they know, generous in what they share, and immeasurable in how they inspire. Paula, you taught me how much can be done with just a few words, so long as they're the right ones; entire worlds can be built or toppled. Lou, you reminded me that our hearts can be felt, heard, smelled, seen, and tasted through language and that every moment should be an important one—a good lesson in writing as well as in life.

To my fellow writers' group members, I thank you for constantly helping me enjoy what is mistakenly thought of as a solitary endeavor, the act of writing. The process of bringing this story forward was daringly supported by talented writers, each with wonderful stories to tell: Beverly Plass, Brad Oatman, Tim Twombly, Fiona Farrell Ivey, Debby Gaal Silverberg, Mary Garliepp Myers, and my former group members—Blake Bullock, Dennis Phinney, Brenda Barrie, and Janet Simcic.

To the wonderful Benrey family of Mareil-Marly, France, I thank you for your friendship, generosity, and kind support in keeping my French references and names in line. We'll always have *profiteroles!*

To the historian and author, Ian Sumner, I send my thanks for your guidance in providing historical detail to my fictional tale, just enough to help me feel authentic but allowing for all the creative license I needed to tell Sophie's story.

To my parents, I thank you for your constant encouragement. I still learn so much from you alter kockers. And a particular thanks to my mother for suggesting I take typing back in high school. Sure came in handy!

To my remaining friends, family, and in-laws too numerous to mention, I am thankful for your love and support, most notably in the form of your forgiveness for the hours I spent writing rather than with you.

And most of all, I thank my dearest Maggie, Emily, and Ethan. You make me want to try harder, live better, learn more, and laugh loudly. You give me hope.

Chapter 1

The Envelope

Full had come, and it made the goats angry. Sophie tried to sing “Au Clair de la Lune” to them, just as her father used to do when she was upset. However, today the animals could not be calmed, and she feared their milk would sour from their discontent.

In truth, Sophie hated the goats, and perhaps they hated her, too. Or maybe it was just their slotted eyes that gave this impression—permanently fixed to view her sideways. They saw Sophie like most people in Avoine saw her—not as a girl with dreams but as the Jewish farmer’s daughter. The goat girl.

She emerged from the barn into the cool evening air, her goosefleshed forearms straining with the weight of the last bucket of goats’ milk. She raised her face to the darkening sky and drew a breath to savor the scents of the river valley. The Loire’s pungent smells and rumbling sounds reassured her that change was natural, inevitable. Tonight, things were going to change; she would see to it.

Sophie lifted her bucket haltingly through the gate, past the blackberries that choked the fence, past the chicken coops, to the cooling shed. She lowered her pail into the cooling box, next to the two others she’d already set there. Angry or not, the goats had been productive. Her father would be pleased.

Free of her cargo, she flexed her fingers to rid them of pain and closed the lid of the cooling box, against the protest of the rusted hinges. She left the shed to head to the chicken coop and stopped, reaching into her dress pocket for the envelope she’d received in yesterday’s mail. She unfolded it and pressed it against a fencepost to smooth out the creases.

“*Université de Paris, La Sorbonne*,” she read to the rooster who’d poked his head through the pen. “This changes everything.” She waved the envelope tauntingly at the cockeyed bird. “Soon I’ll be through with you and those horrible goats.”

As if in response, the rooster clucked quizzically, causing Sophie to giggle. She quickly remembered there was no time for play. Even with the milk taken and the animals penned for the night, she still needed to fix supper for her father. Only then could she have the discussion she’d been planning all day.

She stuffed the envelope back in her pocket. Ignoring the soreness in her legs, she sprinted over the weed-patched field to the house, up the creaking steps to the porch.

Sophie’s father had already lit a lamp in the window of their humble farmhouse, clearly believing it would be dark by the time she completed her chores. As always, he’d underestimated her.

She strode through the front door, expecting to find him after another hard day plowing, sitting in his threadbare chair by the radio, listening to Alix Combelle’s jazz or the latest boring speech from Prime Minister Daladier. Yet her father’s chair was empty and the house was silent. With a look down the hall she confirmed he wasn’t home.

Perfect, she thought. I can prepare supper and surprise him when he returns.

Before dawn, before her chores, she’d ridden her bicycle three kilometers to the only Jewish market near Avoine to retrieve her father’s favorite: kosher lamb. It had cost her three month’s savings and was a long journey to take before her usual routine of feeding the chickens, cleaning the pens, and milking the goats, but her labor would be worth it when her father came home and saw the feast she’d prepared.

Sophie hastened to the kitchen, eager to start, but knocked her toe into a large, wooden chest her father had mysteriously left out in the living room.

“Ow!” She wiggled her toe.

It took her a moment to recognize the chest, usually kept in the depths of the hall closet. It was rare for her father to take anything out of storage and more unusual for him to open his memory chest. The items it contained only served to remind him of Sophie’s deceased mother, a topic of conversation her father always avoided.

Tonight, however, Sophie hoped the conversation would be pleasant. She would put her father in the best of moods, soften him with culinary pleasures, and care for him like a king—at least as much as their meager means would allow. That, she thought, is what it would take to convince him to let her leave for Paris by the month’s end.

Dismissing its peculiar position, she pushed the chest next to her father’s empty chair and moved to the kitchen. She opened the pantry door in search of their last bottle of red wine, a particularly good one, saved for a special occasion. They had no money to spend on such things, but the gift from Monsieur Marcoux, given at Purim, had languished in the dark cupboard long enough.

To her surprise, the bottle was gone. She searched the cabinet behind the sack of flour and below the sink where she kept the copper boiling pot, but couldn’t find the wine.

Perhaps Papa’s given it away. . . Whatever the case, it didn’t matter. Her father would find ample pleasure in her lamb and parsnips.

From the kitchen drawer, she snatched her grandmother’s linen tablecloth, and from the rack by the sink she retrieved the tall water glasses. She set the table, folded the napkins, turned on the gas, and lit the stove and oven. She then chopped the onions, warmed the bread, and readied herself for her big night.

Once the scents of broiled lamb, sizzling onions, and rosemary had filled the house, Sophie lit the fire in the hearth and turned on the radio to search for the jazz her father adored. Instead, all she found was news of Germany, how Hitler had begun closing Jewish businesses, treating Jews as criminals, moving people to ghettos. She knew enough to know that Germans couldn’t be trusted—even now, so long after the Great War—and that they were no friends to Jews, but why would they want to send Jews to ghettos? The announcer said America’s President Roosevelt had admonished the Germans and that Prime Minister Daladier predictably agreed. Whatever the issue, she thought, it didn’t concern her here on the farm.

She turned the dial and finally found the bouncy trumpet of the American Louis Armstrong—one of her father’s favorites. With the scene now set, the only thing missing was her father. She moved to the door and opened it to the evening air.

“Papa?” she called. “Dinner’s ready.”

Her father startled her when he leaned in from around the corner of the house, the open bottle of Purim wine clutched in his hand. He'd been outside the house all along.

"Smells good," he said softly.

His demeanor was curious, his gaze not quite meeting hers. As he drew nearer, she saw his eyes glossy with sadness. His breath was sour with wine and his shaggy black hair was tussled. He hadn't shaved and the stubble on his face, peppered gray, made him look tired. Not quite drunk, he seemed, haunted.

"Papa, what's wrong?"

He moved past her into the house. "Nothing, *ma chère*."

"Were you crying?" she asked. "What's happened?" She rushed to follow him back into the house.

He blinked, sniffed the air, and offered a forced smile. "You've cooked lamb."

"Yes." She donned a grin, hoping to find some happy influence over him and change his mysterious mood. "Your favorite."

Her father pushed the door closed and took his seat at the table. He rubbed his shoulder, the one that gave him trouble when the weather got cold.

Sophie bustled back to the kitchen to retrieve the dish of lamb warming in the oven, one eye locked on her father, trying to decode his behavior. Using her frayed oven mitt, she carried the dish, bubbling with rosemary gravy, to the oak table and set it in front of him.

He leaned forward and breathed in the meal as if smelling her cooking for the first time. What was wrong with him?

Sophie took a seat and her father bowed his head. He half-heartedly mumbled the Hebrew *brucha* over the meal and then turned to her. "This is lovely."

"I wanted to surprise you. It's kosher."

Her father did not respond, instead surveying the food and the house around them. He seemed somehow displaced, more than could be attributed to the wine he'd consumed.

Rather than asking the reason for the fancy meal or where she could have scrounged the money to fund it, her father glanced to the window and stared into the shadow of dusk.

Perhaps the cause of his anxiety was buried in the memory chest he'd dragged out to the living room. Nothing in his behavior made sense.

"Papa," Sophie said. "What is it? What's wrong?"

He turned back to the lamb and parsnips without remark, as if he hadn't heard a word. He served Sophie and then himself, giving his attention to the food.

She reached into her pocket to stroke the tattered edge of the envelope, recalling the letter's final promise: with the proper secondary school transcripts, written recommendations from her teachers, and her father's permission, she could begin her art history courses by the end of the month. The scholarship from her school would cover the first semester's tuition. The rest would be up to her.

"Please, Papa... Tell me."

Her father put down his tarnished fork with a clink on the dish. He chewed quickly and wiped his mouth with the edge of the tablecloth, mistaking it for his napkin.

"Something has happened, Sophie," he said at last. "Something important."

She released the envelope in her pocket and moved her hand to the table, trying to keep her fingers from trembling. She'd never known her father to be this dramatic.

"The Germans," he said flatly. "They've invaded Poland." He took a breath. "Now, they appear to be on the move." He again turned to look outside as if he was sitting in Poland and the Germans were just outside the door.

Sophie had heard stories of the Great War, of how her grandfather had died defending France, fighting the Germans. She knew they took Austria last year, and then part of Czechoslovakia, but her father hadn't seemed troubled about it, so she gave it little thought. The radio had just said they were bothering the Jews in Germany, but she must've missed the part about Poland. Why would this so upset her father? They didn't know anyone there.

"Yes," she said trying to engage him. "I heard something on the news."

Her father reached into his pocket and pulled out a letter of his own, which he tossed onto the table as though folding a losing hand in a game of cards.

Sophie's heart raced in time with the frenetic Armstrong jazz from the radio. Had the university sent her father a letter as well? Had he learned of her plans before she could prepare him? Surely he'd think they couldn't afford La

Sorbonne, but Sophie would find work. She'd get a job at a *fromagerie* or help some family in exchange for room and board. . .

"Papa, I can explain. Paris is my dream, and you know I love art—"

"France is calling all able men to serve," he announced. Her father finally faced her, his sunken eyes now focused and precise implying he'd made his final point. Yet, if he had, that point was lost on Sophie.

"To serve?"

"To fight if this becomes a war, Sophie. That letter is from *l'Armée de Terre*. They're starting with those who've served before. Remember my service? I leave Friday."

"Friday?"

His meaning swirled into focus, and the room seemed to close in on her. He rose from the table and walked to the memory chest. He lifted the heavy lid with one hand and reached into the chest with his other, drawing out a folded stack of woolen clothes he then placed on his chair.

He pulled one garment free from the stack and turned to Sophie, letting the fabric unfurl in front of him as he held it to his shoulders. It was his uniform from his days as a young soldier.

"Do you think I'll still be handsome?" He offered a broken smile, attempting to change the mood. "Your mother used to think I was good looking in my uniform."

Sophie opened her mouth and hoped to hear herself say something convincing, something magical that would change everything, make it right. However, no sound came.

War? All she knew of war was that it had left her grandmother a widow and her own father fatherless—a pain topped, he had said, only by the loss of her mother on the day of Sophie's birth. Her father had served the army when he was a younger man in more peaceful times. What did he know about fighting a war?

"You can't go," she said at last. "You can't."

"There's no choice, *ma chère*. France needs me."

"I need you," she snapped back, already feeling like she'd lost him. "Who will run the farm? Who will care for me?" She realized that, only moments ago, she'd planned to leave the farm, leave her father, to tell him that he could hire a boy from the village and that he didn't need her at all. She'd planned

to say pointedly, but with pride, that she didn't need him to care for her any longer—the very thing she was now claiming was so important.

"Your grandmother," he replied, tossing his uniform onto the chair. "You'll stay with her in Ville de Lemaire. It's all been arranged. We'll close the farm until I return."

"Return? How do you know you'll return?"

"I'll return," he pronounced, "because I said I'll return." He gathered the uniform from the chair and retreated to his bedroom, where he closed his door with a thud, his final words on the matter spoken.

Sophie reached into her pocket for the envelope from the university. Without removing the letter, she walked to the hearth, tore the envelope in two, and tossed the pieces into the fire, a fitting end, she thought, to both her dreams and the dinner her father hardly noticed.



The cold outside the farmhouse grew and the wind began to lick at the walls. Sophie scrubbed the dishes with extra vigor, uncertain if she was more angry or sad at the cruel irony of her circumstance. On the very day she'd been ready to reveal her secret dream, it was, instead, a secret fear she'd realized. Her father's letter, not hers, had set her destiny. Now, rather than preparing for her own adventure, she was preparing for abandonment; she was preparing for his death, which she knew would surely come.

This seemed to be her curse, to send those she loved to an untimely death. Her mother had died in childbirth, and Sophie had always felt she was the one responsible, even when her father had assured her otherwise.

"Your mother's frailty was not your fault," he'd said. "Nature took her, not you." Just as he'd done tonight, he'd made it clear: there was to be no debate about things he'd already decided. The truth of things was his alone to declare.

Nevertheless, Sophie held the belief that, if she'd been important enough, her mother would have found a way to live, and that it was she who was responsible. Now her father too was getting ready to leave her, to court death, choosing the dangers of war over her. Her need of him wasn't enough to keep him home, just as it hadn't been enough to keep her mother alive.

Paris would have changed everything. It would have made her an educated teacher of art, a cosmopolitan lady. The women of Paris, the ones in the magazines, were glamorous. They had opportunity, they had art, and they had love. Such women only brought joy to those around them. Such women would never bear a curse like hers, and none of them ever had to touch a goat.

Sophie wiped clean the last dinner plate, her anxiety rising like the storm outside. Was the whole world growing unsettled?

She tossed her rag aside, left the remaining pots upside down in the sink to dry, and retreated to the bathroom to gain some measure of composure. As she passed her father's room, she heard the familiar rumble of his snoring. The combination of wine and food had bested him, though Sophie still felt restless like the wind.

With a huff, she filled the bathroom basin with water from a ceramic pitcher and cleaned her face with a thin shard of foul-smelling soap. She employed the same angry vigor to her cheeks that she'd used to scrub the dinner plates, eager to clean away as much of this dreadful day as she could.

She dried herself with a crispy, line-dried towel, then, without bothering to change into her nightclothes, kicked off her muddy shoes and climbed into bed. With a final glance to the small Van Gogh postcard on her wall and Monet bookplate over her desk, she blew out her bedside candle. The artists of her dreams would have to wait.

The tree at her window, now animated by the angry breeze, clawed at the clapboards, determined to keep her from sleep. She closed her eyes, turned away from the window, and wished for the darkness to take her. She drew her knitted blanket to her ears and tried to ignore the ghoulish cacophony.

Just as she felt herself drifting, the wind unlatched a shutter in the front of the house, freeing it to beat against the window frame. In her half-dream state, she imagined it wasn't a shutter at all, but the French army, pounding on the door, demanding her father come with them. The wind's whistle became a wail, and the wail soon became a woman's scream—the cries of her mother, inexplicably alive, howling in grief, the way Sophie imagined her on the night she'd killed her, seventeen years ago.

The world was wrenching itself apart and Sophie knew, as she braced herself, that her curse wouldn't be so easily defeated after all.

Chapter 2

Friday's Rain

Just as Sophie feared, Friday had come too soon. Throughout the week, a cold and unrelenting rain had fallen as though the sky itself had felt her sorrow.

She'd spent the week packing what few belongings were worth keeping—the art books from her mother, her Van Gogh print depicting the artist's room at Arles, a few dresses and necessities, and the handful of photos and keepsakes her mother had left behind.

They'd sold the goats and chickens to Monsieur Marcoux. This was a feat of luck, according to her father. Half the men in town had tried to do the same, but Monsieur Marcoux, himself a Jew, had shown them favor, or perhaps pity.

Now, weary from lack of sleep and a profound sadness, Sophie stood beside the wagon in the shelter of the musty barn, warming her fingers under her arms. She wore her favorite blue dress to impress her father, although its ornate floral patterns were hidden beneath the thick black coat he'd insisted she wear. Again, his plans had supplanted hers.

Their gray horse, Plouf, stood unfazed in his stall, munching oats from a feedbag. He appeared calm, giving no care to Sophie, the sound of the rain, or the wagon and rigging that awaited him. To Plouf, it seemed this was just another drizzly morning.

Sophie tapped her frozen foot, waiting for her father as he raced around the farm in the rain, closing the house, inspecting its security one final time. They'd spent the predawn hours under the shelter of the barn, storing away household items in the rafters and loading the wagon with Sophie's necessities