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Dreary Paris in the Fall: 'How We Dread Winter'



Paris, Winter, 1945

Last winter Joseph S. Evans Jr., NEWSWEEK'S chief European correspondent, spent a cold, dreary, and typical day with a typical French family. Last week Toni Howard of NEWSWEEK'S Paris bureau also spent a typical day with another typical French family. Here is her account of life in France, September 1945.

We started the day early, my suburban-housewife hostess and I, coming out on the streets at 7:30, the same time as the husband, who works as an accountant in a Paris firm, left for his office. In the chill early-morning mist we watched him set off for the nearest Metro station six blocks away. Then, armed with three shopping bags, an empty pitcher, and a small packet of newspapers, we hurried along the empty streets toward the markets.

Worms Included: Early as we were, the market was already full of hawkers and shoppers, but we slipped immediately into the right queue and began a long halting march toward the fruit counter. Here a hawker sold green grapes at about 30 cents a pound, fresh figs at 25 cents a pound, apples and pears at 35 cents a pound. But when I tried to pick out a few of the less wormy apples, I was told sharply it was forbidden, that the low price was possible only by making everyone take chances with worms.

Then on to the fish counter, where theoretically we were entitled to a pound and a half of fish for a month. There were several remnants of unidentifiable large fish and a few eels reclining on the counter, but unfortunately our number was not posted so we could not buy. My companion explained the dealer posts numbers in rotation—when your number is up you receive your ration. The last time her fish number was posted, however, was July.

At the meat stand we found the counter absolutely empty. A woman attendant with cheerful finality said: "No meat." "Oh dear," said my hostess, "that means we have to go black marketing again."

Ends Don't Meet: The next stop was a bakery a few blocks away, where we bought a yard of bread, a three-person ration for a day. Finally, at about noon, we started for home, a modest five-room apartment on the third-floor walkup of a reasonably modern building. I had pur-

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posely chosen this family because it was of typical size—a husband, wife, and two children—because of the lower middle-class income, and because they lived in a Paris suburb—the nearest thing to a typical American suburb you could find in France. Unlike most apartments in the American towns, however, this one had no curtains, no rugs, nothing except the most necessary furniture. This was because every possible textile ration point was needed for clothing. Apologizing for the bareness of her home, the housewife explained she had made the dress she was wearing from her husband's old shirts. "It is too much," she said. "It is impossible to have enough tickets and enough money to make ends meet in either food or clothing."

At this moment the 8-year-old son came in. We all started washing for lunch, using a bar of rough brown soap which was the entire ration for two people for a month, drying our hands on an unbleached muslin towel which the mother said she bought on ration points for \$36 a dozen. Within a short time we were seated around a table eating sliced beets, tomatoes, bread and butter (served only when there is company), and boiled potatoes, drinking vin ordinaire, and talking about the days of the German occupation.

The other son, who is 15, is now in Normandy on a farm, where the mother hopes he will gain weight and get rid of the pleurisy which he contracted during the war. Like most children his age in France, he is 20 to 25 pounds underweight.

The Clean Black Market: After ersatz coffee, we sent the boy off to the neighbor's and set out again to finish shopping, again armed with bags, papers, and a china pitcher. First we visited a creamery where we bought a small cheese less than a pound in weight, which was the ration for one person for a month. But still there was neither milk nor eggs to be had.

But what we really wanted to buy was meat, so we walked about 1½ miles to a butcher shop hidden on a tiny street. It was unlike any mental picture I had had of a black market. It was a neat, clean, bare shop, with not a single piece of meat to be seen. The butcher greeted us as old friends, went into the other room, and returned shortly with a small rolled steak. From this he sliced off a chunk about 2 pounds in weight, wrapped it in our newspapers, and dropped it in the shopping bag. The entire transaction took no more than two minutes and cost about \$7.

It was late afternoon now and when we entered the apartment it was cold and damp. We set the empty milk pitcher on the table and started cooking the meat for dinner. While fixing the food, my hostess called the son in from the neighbor's, and set him to work unraveling an old sweater so she could knit socks for him with the used yarn. "How we dread winter!" she said. "We still do not know whether the schools will be heated nor how much coal there will be for heating the apartment building. We are told it will be better this year, but last year even the hospitals were not heated. Babies and invalids died of exposure.

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Even if it is better, it can still be very bad.” She peered into a pan where the meat was rapidly cooking down. “Three hundred and fifty francs’ worth of meat,” she said. “How silly!”

