

Paris

14 May 2024

France

Day
of rest

Sacré-Cœur

La Basilique du Sacré-Cœur de Montmartre (the Sacred Heart Basilica of Montmartre) has had its steps decorated in preparation for the Paris Olympic Games from July 26-Aug. 11.

PARIS 2024



Under the dome

Inside Sacré Cœur. The inscription says
France (Gallia) is "penitent and devoted."

Day of rest

SOURCES: Underlined words link to them.

It wasn't a Sunday, but after the fatigue of catching a pre-dawn train the day before for our all-day immersion in the history and emotion of Normandy's D-Day beaches, we needed a day in Paris that involved minimal scheduling.

Elaine Mokhtefi suggested we meet her for *petit déjeuner* at her favorite café in the 6th Arrondissement. She's a cousin of a former colleague, Elisa Koff-Ginsborg, whom Elisa described in her introductory email as a writer and accomplished artist. That was an undersell.

After croissants and coffee, we went back to Elaine's apartment (she lives in New York most of the time) on the top floor of a building that was finished about the time Christopher Columbus sailed for the New World. There was one of those cage elevators like you see in all the old movies for the first three or four floors. Then she led us another floor or two up a narrow spiral stairwell that would frighten a mountain goat. But she's 96 years old and used to the climb on steps with just enough tread width for your toes to reach a tiny apartment tucked beneath the roof beams.

"I love France and French cooking," she said. "The French, not so much."

Elaine Klein, a secular Jew from Hempstead, New York, first went to France as a 23-year-old in 1951, the year I was born. She'd already been kicked out of small Wesleyan College in Macon, Georgia, for spending too much time with its small group of black students, she said, and was ready to explore more of the world.

She had studied languages, and in France she got work as a translator, which allowed her to travel internationally. She found purpose working with anti-racist and anti-colonialist groups, especially Algerians, whose North African country had been a French colony since 1832 and would finally win its independence in 1962 after a brutal six-year war. What particularly inspired her, she told us, was that in her first year in Paris, French trade unionists had blocked Algerian laborers from marching with them in the annual May Day parade.

In its 2018 interview of her following publication of her memoir, *Algiers, Third World Capital: Freedom Fighters, Revolutionaries, Black Panthers* (inset photo on next page), she described herself to the British newspaper *The Guardian* as "one of the dreamers who came to build a more perfect world." She moved to Algeria after independence to marry Mokhtar Mokhtefi, whose own memoir is the second inset photo.

Over the course of her residency in Algeria, the country became a haven for liberation movements. She worked as assistant to the president's press adviser and in the national press agency writing releases and opinion pieces, organising conferences, publishing a magazine, and writing and directing radio shows, according to *The Guardian*. It brought her into contact with people from Black Panther leader Eldredge Cleaver to LSD advocate Timothy Leary, filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard, writer Simone de Beauvoir and singer, civil rights activist and North Carolina native Nina Simone.

As we left her apartment, Elaine was within weeks of returning to the United States herself and thinking it might be time to sell her place in Paris. If she does, she's thinking about endowing a scholarship program for foreign students at UCLA.



Elaine Mokhtefi

Surrounded by her art and books in her apartment in Saint Germain des Pres.



Les Frères Bretons

The Breton Bros rustled up a nice
mess of crêpes for our dinner.



Emily et les fleurs

Emily checks out the selection at a sidewalk nursery in the neighborhood where we stayed in Paris.

Notes on photos

SOURCES: Underlined words link to them.

SACRÉ CŒUR and UNDER THE DOME — Kicking the Napoleon habit was tough for the proud French. Napoleon I was considered a great military leader after defeating the Austrians, Italians, Prussians and Russians while also crowning himself emperor. But he made a mistake that Adolf Hitler failed to learn from in the next century and invaded Russia in 1812, a disaster that Russian composer Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky turned into the world's most famous musical work with cannons as the featured instrument. N-I tried to make his son, Napoleon II, emperor but the French nobility wouldn't go for it. Napoleon III did four years as France's first president and then 19 years as self-crowned emperor when he couldn't legally run for re-election. He did a lot of important stuff, including ordering the huge urban renewal project that gave Paris its boulevards and parks. But he picked on the wrong guy in Prussia's Otto von Bismarck, lost the war and was captured in battle in 1870. The Bishop of Nantes and French politician, Félix Fournier, blamed these Napoleonic failures on divine punishment for the moral decline of France since the 1789 the French Revolution. Fournier persuaded his friend and philanthropist Alexandre Legentil to lead a fund-raising campaign to build a church in Montmartre on the tallest hill in Paris because, in Legentil's words translated into English, "We recognize that we were guilty and justly punished. To make honourable amends for our sins, and to obtain the infinite mercy of the Sacred Heart of our Lord Jesus Christ ... we promise to contribute to the erection in Paris of a sanctuary dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus." The Basilica of Sacré-Cœur de Montmartre was begun in 1875 and finished in 1914. The church has been the object of ridicule by French leftists, who successfully blocked its being named a national landmark until 2022.

ELAINE MOKHTEFI — It doesn't show in the photo, but Elaine is an artist as well as an author and several of her paintings decorate the apartment. The room today was once the building's granary, where grain was stored away from moisture and pests. During the building's time as a residence for the wealthy, her apartment was divided into four rooms, each just large enough for the bed of one maid. She combined the four rooms and created the kitchen/living area, which you see, a sleeping area and a bathroom with a shower and washing machine.

LES FRÈRES BRETONS — This restaurant was suggested to us by Emily's sister, Allison, who had visited Paris with her husband just a week or so before we came through. Good call. 117 Boulevard de Grenelle.

EMILY ET LES FLEURS — We did a lot of walking in the neighborhood of our hotel. It was full of cafés, bakeries and the small shops that make the city's neighborhoods livable for residents and charming for its visitors. And, during the afternoon thunderstorm, there was a McDonald's with a big upstairs dining room where you could hang out until it was safe to walk again.

THE NEIGHBORHOOD — Although the Eiffel Tower was just a couple of minutes' walk away, we had visited before and didn't feel particularly compelled to go again. Part of the reason was construction for temporary stadiums to be used for the Paris Olympics later this summer. Scaffolding and other construction evidence was all over Paris. The area directly beneath the tower will be used for cultural events. The park known as the Champ de Mars immediately to the southeast will contain two temporary competition venues: an outdoor stadium for beach volleyball and an indoor facility to be used at the Paralympic Games that follow the Olympics for para judo and wheelchair rugby. The Pont d'Iéna, a bridge over the Seine at the Eiffel Tower, will be used for race walking, the marathon and road cycling, and the river itself will be part of the triathlon course.



Our neighborhood

We stayed just around the corner last time we were in Paris in 2017, but there was no room at that inn this time.