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The Spies of Warsaw by Alan Furst, Random House, 2008

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Warsaw. Autumn, 1937. Edvard Uhl, a plodding, middle-aged German engineer, is meeting his Polish mistress, the enigmatic, impoverished Countess Sczelenska - who is, of course, neither a Countess nor even a Pole - at the Hotel Europejski. Tomorrow, in exchange for a thousand zloty in a seedy bar, Uhl will deliver the blueprints for the Wehrmacht’s latest tank. The Spies of Warsaw (Random House, 2008) is the tenth installment in Alan Furst’s series of historical espionage thrillers set before and during the Second World War. A prequel of sorts to his elegant The Polish Officer, The Spies of Warsaw follows the aristocratic Colonel Jean-François Mercier, hero of the Great War of 1914-1918, military academy classmate of de Gaulle, and military attaché at the French embassy in Warsaw, as he works in the shadow world of espionage while Poland waits for war. As Mercier’s work unfolds, we meet Colonel Vyborg of the Polish Intelligence Service; Anna Szarbek, the mysterious and beautiful Franco-Polish lawyer for the League of Nations; the Rosens, the Jewish “Old Bolshevik” spies recalled to Moscow to await an executioner’s bullet; the patriotic Dr Rapp, the senior Abwehr officer in Warsaw, who politely enquires if Mercier’s interests involve the Germany he loves, or the Nazi Party he privately loathes; and SS counterintelligence Major August Voss, whose self-appointed mission in Warsaw appalls even his own brother SS officers. And there is the perhaps obligatory meal at the Brasserie Heininger in Paris, eaten at the coveted table fourteen, beneath the mirror with a bullet hole in its lower corner.

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