Maddi y las fronteras
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Maddi y las fronteras (Maddi and the borders) is a novel based on the life of a real person, Maria Josefa Sansberro. Maddi was born in Spain near the French border in the Basque region. She eventually moved to the French side, managed a popular hotel saving it from ruin and eventually married its owner. She was also an active smuggler, initially buying products from Spain for the hotel. Later, with her intimate knowledge of the border region and her contacts on both sides, she joined the French resistance and used her skills and knowledge in service to the cause.

Although the era of the 1930's and 40's has been the subject of countless literary works, telling the story through Maddi's perspective offers new insight by featuring a region that is not at the forefront of the events of the time. Additionally, I know of no other spy novel of this era in which the protagonist is an average person functioning as a high level spy. Early in the novel the hotel provides a safe haven for refugees fleeing the horrors of the Spanish Civil War. The tables are turned when the Second World War begins and the German army quickly occupies all of France and the war is brought to the normally quiet corner of the world.

Soon after, German officers take up residence in the hotel. Maddi, an average woman bordering on middle age, is a somewhat reluctant and unlikely spy. She is so skillful, however, that she manages to pass messages and smuggle Jews and allied soldiers to safety in Spain, right under the noses of her nazi guests for several years.

The borders in the story are figurative as well as literal. Maddi is a non-conformist, who lives life on her own terms. We discover in the early part of the novel that she crossed the border of convention by divorcing her first husband and living as an independent woman. She then crosses the physical border between Spain and France to begin a new life as a single woman, who is the manager of a hotel.

The story is told in the first person by Maddi. It is notable that in the early pages of the novel as Maddi's life and the setting is revealed, the sentences are very short and direct. The narration is also mainly linear, beginning with her arrival at the hotel and ends with her death in a concentration camp. Introspection and a window into Maddi's pshyche is provided by her prayers. She is a devout catholic and particularly as the novel progresses, she regularly carries on a monologue with God, thanking, requesting, complaining or explaining her feelings. As the novel progresses the dialogues increase with her husband Louis, adopted son Lucien and cousin Marie Jeanne, as Maddi's social circle at the hotel takes shape.

Maddi's tale becomes more and more gripping as she takes great risks to fulfill her duties to the resistance, always having to invent plausible explanations to justify her movements to the German

officers she serves at the hotel and constantly worrying about what information she can share with whom. Will she inadvertantly say something incriminating to a nazi collaborator? From the start of her activities with the resistance, she is fully aware of the horrors that await her if she is caught. She also lives with the anguish of having allowed her young and beautiful cousin Marie Jeanne to join her network.

Heartbreakingly, Maddi and Marie Jeanne are arrested soon after the allied invasion of Normandy. If they had just managed to avoid capture a little longer than they may have been liberated. Maddi's fate is reminiscent of that of Anne Frank, who survived most of the war years but was captured at towards the end and died soon after in a concentration camp. As it turns out Maddi and Marie Jeanne are both tortured and transported to concentration camps in Germany like cattle in train cars and then subjected to the most inhumane and cruel conditions imaginable in the camps, which Maddi does not survive.

I think that this novel would be well received by the American public and should be translated for English speakers. It is paramount that people of the modern era remember how fascism affected average people. The era of the Second World War is fascinating to many Americans and Maddi's story of a smuggler and spy outwitting the invaders while living with them in the same hotel is highly compelling. Her story becomes absolutely rivetting as Maddi takes on increasingly dangerous missions and agonizes over the peril to which she exposes herself and loved ones.

Personally, I loved reading this book. I think it is necessary to make this novel accessible to as many people as possible, particularly the U.S. reading public.