

## Mourning for Notre Dame

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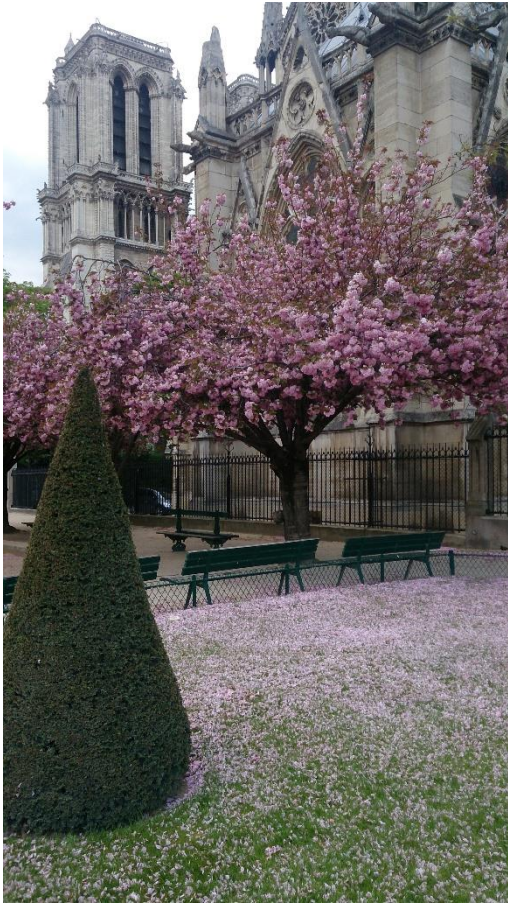
*900 years of wars and revolutions - France submitted to four years of German occupation, in part to save this most magnificent of magnificent edifices.*

I was not 50 metres away, having a coffee at one of my favourite places - partly because of its unrivalled view of Notre Dame, with its Spring Cherry Blossoms in the foreground. I had just obliged an American couple with a photo featuring Our Lady watching patiently there behind them - reassuring all that she would forever be there.

Several times a week I pass through that pretty garden between the flying buttresses and the ever-poetic Seine. One of the most beautiful places on Earth, I never fail to remark: how lucky I am to be able to walk so close to History: what could those stones tell if they could speak. Stones carved painstakingly by generations of master craftsmen, who gave their whole lives to creating this Cathedral that would warm the hearts of unbelievers a millennium later. How many generations of mere buildings came and went, while she stood - enduring, surmounting everything.

Except renovations. I was there, watching helplessly. First the Police, then the Pompiers. At first I wondered why they seemed to be doing nothing, but when I saw the billows of sulphur smoke, I realised that they probably couldn't go in, for the toxic fumes would over-power them before they could do anything useful. The Cathedral was in the process of a 20-year restoration programme, hence, I suppose (we'll find out in due course), the chemicals stored, inexplicably, inside the edifice.

I turned to leave - I was due at a gathering for the *Grand Débat* and the President's address. I wondered how much I could possibly concentrate. Not much, it happened. The President postponed his address, and those of us at the gathering tried, between horrifying images of the central tower collapsing onto - how much history? We tried, resolutely, to talk about the future of Europe, while we watched one of its most precious treasures disintegrate.



Countless wars and an historically violent revolution couldn't bring her down. It took a renovation to do that.

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