

THE IMPOSTURE.

Maurice Rowdon.

The Russians had moved out of Graz further south and our job was to occupy this city and establish some sort of de-Nazi-fication system, more lenient than it would be in Germany because the Austrians had shown themselves less bitter enemies. My regiment took billets in a small village outside Graz called Maria Trost, a quiet place full of wooden balconied houses and inns.

The war hadn't long ended. News had come through of the concentration camps. Hundreds of thousands of people had been put in gas ovens, tortured, burned to death, starved and mutilated in experiments. These included women and children. Nearly all the Jewish population of Europe had been wiped out. It was nearly the extermination of a whole people.

We had come to Maria Trost from Carinthia near the Yugoslav border, where we'd lived in barns, with the harvest going on all round us. We took our meals, about eight of us, in the downstairs room of a farmyard and used to watch the wheat being brought in, across the space in front of the house where two elm trees grew, with wooden benches and a table under them. At this table, nearly all day, an old man used to sit, the owner of the farm. He also watched the work, saying hardly anything, his eyes small and bloodshot and staring like gritty little pellets straight before him. He said he thought these stories about the concentration camps were ridiculous, and laughed. We said that too many reports were coming in from all over Germany and Poland,

from English, French, American and Russian troops, for them to be doubtful. And there were photographs, we said. There was also a film being shown at every town and village in Germany to which attendance was compulsory. But this film hadn't reached Austria yet;

The old man laughed and shook his head. He spoke slowly to his daughters and seemed to be mocking us in a quiet way. He wasn't the slightest bit afraid of us, though we were the first troops in the area. He told us that every arm brought its own propaganda and that this was ours. Only a fool would believe it, he said. The Germans had had their propaganda and we had ours. It was absurd to imagine that Germans or Austrians would organise camps in which thousands of people were left to die of starvation, much less tortured or---of all things---put into gas ovens. These were childrens' tales, like all propaganda tales, fit for simple people and intended for them. But he'd lived too long and seen too much. We were young, he said, and our credulity was understandable. His little pellét eyes didn't change. They had a certain sly, side-glancing quality which made me distrust him, but perhaps this was because he refused to believe in the camps.

Then we were moved to Graz and I never saw him again. In Graz there were different stories, this time about the Russians. They had raped most of the women, and over ninety percent of the female population had VD of some kind. In Maria Trost where we billeted a drunk Russian soldier had emptied a magazine of machine-gun bullets into the church at the top of the hill and then fired four or five shots into a bedroom where a woman and child lay. Luckily, the bullets had missed them. There were piles of filth in some of the buildings. Over the city itself there was

a dry, surfeited air. Everything was pretty and in order, the damage was slight, but a desolation had taken hold. The present seemed not to be real time but a period of waiting for the future, when peace would really come.

One day my driver took me into Graz in an open jeep---I had to visit another regimental headquarters. The end of the war had made me feel tired. We'd been raced back to Italy for a last campaign, then missed it: but our happiness at missing it didn't seem to match the occasion. We were just numb. I even had a sense of disappointment. I'd wanted to do something remarkable in that last campaign, and I felt thwarted of a certain prize I would always miss: perhaps it was death. I'd already had too many lucky escapes for the law of averages to favour me any more.

It was a giddy and ridiculous feeling, of a relief conceived in the brain rather than felt, and a sense of something mystical having been snatched away. It made me restless, and life was meaningless without war.

But for the first time in two or three years my stomach felt easy. There would be no more front-line assignments. No more of that special dark smell of rotting cattle which had pervaded all of Italy. A long time had passed since I'd watched my batman die with great wounds in his back. I hadn't believed my eyes. Being young, I didn't believe death was really possible. I told one of the men to give him a last cigarette, and he did so, bending down. The batman was lying on his stomach and took it in his mouth feebly. But just as someone was about to strike a match he coughed and a spurt of blood filled the cigarette, making it swell up, and it fell with a plop to the floor. For

years I carried this memory about with me. Yet when it was all over my heart was cold to the relief.

I was even aware of a slight resentment of peace. Now the work had been done it would pass unrecognized. Too many people had been involved in the war for there to be anyone available to give the recognition: there were no fathers or governments safe at home to give thanks, as in the old days. Peace was an imposture! It offered no distinctions as to who had the secret stigma of suffering on him, who had been there and who hadn't. All sorts of proud people would step forward now---like the Jewish brigade which had replaced us as commanders of a prisoner-of-war camp full of SS troops in the north of Italy, and had instituted, with a show of contempt for us, new harsh measures of discipline, to make the Germans feel who'd won the war. Yet that brigade had done almost no fighting, if any! That was the sort of bitter thing that happened.

I spent little time at the headquarters and we drove back slowly. It was fine morning and we had just driven into the wide avenue on the outskirts of Graz which led to Maria Trost when we saw two figures strolling along in front of us. They were dressed in British uniforms but they were clearly not soldiers. I was suddenly furious. They had no shoulder markings, no signs of rank, no divisional badges, no caps even! They were slouching like civilians. The uniforms were new.

I told the driver to pull over to the right and he did so, bringing the car to a sudden skidding halt. It was absolutely preposterous that only a few weeks after the war had ended people should be strolling along in our uniform, which to me had the stigma of suffering on it. They'd probably picked

it up at an army stores for a couple of dozen eggs or a horse or a car or a huge bag of sugar. It was preposterous that so soon after the war the uniform should become meaningless and all distinctions disappear.

The car stopped at the kerb quite close to them. They were young with fair hair, and quite clearly not English or American. They were Austrians, perhaps. They were about the same age as I was. When they heard the skid of our tyres they at once stopped and took a frightened step back, close together. I shouted at the top of my voice.

'Where did you get those uniforms?'

They said something in German which I didn't understand and I repeated my question, glaring at them. One of them blushed and his eyes seemed to grow sightless in a most strange way. But I went on putting my questions, shouting. Where did they get those uniforms? They bumped together as they stood on the pavement, unable to find words. I noticed for the first time that they had rather shy, delicate faces. They might have been students. And I also noticed that they were looking at me not only with fear but with horror, their mouths open slightly, their expressions almost identical, whereas I had expected them to behave in a surly way, as local people sometimes did. I'd never seen this look of spell-bound horror directed at me before.

There was a brief silence, and my driver tugged my arm slightly. I was trembling. 'Sir, sir!' he was whispering. I felt he was embarrassed for me but I was determined not to be lackadaisical about this as no doubt he would have been.

'Sir, sir,' he said, 'they say they're Jews. They've just been released from concentration camp.'

I stared at them and after a long pause said, 'Jews?'

Then I tried to smile at them. I put my hand out of the car, though they were standing some yards away, and said with a ridiculous sort of nod, 'It's all right, I didn't know, I'm sorry, please go, it's all right.' But they went on staring at me. 'It's all right,' I said, 'I didn't know.' Then, after another silence, I told the driver to move off, and he quickly put the car in gear and drove away, his head slightly down. Even as we moved away they continued to follow me with their stares, which were strangely sightless.