'THE IMPOSTURE'

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Maurice Rowdon,
Via Giulia 102,
Rome, ITALY.

The Russians had moved out of Graz, further north, and our job was to occupy it and establish some sort of de-Nazification 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, sweet place full of wooden, balconied houses and inns.

The War had not 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. We heard the story of a woman whose feet had been tied together a few minutes before she was due to give birth to a child. Nearly all the Jewish population of Europe had been wipedx out. It was nearly the extermination of a whole people.

We had come to Maria Trost from Carinthia, near the Yugoslav border, where we had lived in barns, with hay being gathered all round us. We took our meals, about eight of us, in a room of a farmhouse, and used to watch the hay 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 concen-

tration 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. There was also a film being shown at every town and village in Germany, to which attendance was compulsory. But it 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 his area. He told us that every army brought its own propaganda, and this was ours. Only a fool would believe it, he said. The Germans had had their propaganda, and this was ours. It was quite 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 put into gas ovens. They were children's tales, like all propaganda tales, fit for the very simple, and intended for them. But he had lived too long, and seen too much. We were young, he said, and our credulity was understandable. His little pellet 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.

After two or three weeks we were moved to Graz and never saw him again. In Graz there were different stories. The Russians had raped most of the women, and over ninety percent had venereal disease. 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 bed-

room where a woman and her child lay. The bullets had missed them, it was said. There were piles of filth outside some of the buildings. Over Graz there was a dry, surfeited air. Everything was pretty and in order, the damage was slight, but a desolation had taken hold. The present ~~This~~ 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---I was an officer and I had to visit another regimental headquarters. We were in a Jeep. The end of the War made me feel rather tired. We had raced back into Italy for a last campaign in the north, our third, after a rest in the Lebanon, and the War ended before our columns reached the 'B' Echelons of the forward troops. This was what we had wanted---~~it had been easy to predict from the way battle lines moved on the operational map during the previous few weeks~~---but at the same time our happiness didn't seem enough to match the occasion. The heart was quite still. I even had a sense of disappointment. I had wanted to do something really remarkable in this last campaign in Italy, and felt thwarted of something essential that I would always miss: perhaps it was death, which I had been sure would get me this time, because I had already had too many lucky escapes. It was a giddy and ridiculous feeling, of a relief conceived in the brain rather than felt, and the sense of something having been snatched away. It made me restless, and life seemed quite meaningless without war.

But for the first time in nearly three years my stomach felt easy. There would be no more front-line assignments. There would no longer be that special dark smell of rotting cattle which had pervaded all of Italy. A long time had passed since I had w[illegible] a batman

had watched a batman---my own batman, and my first---die, with great red wounds in his back. I couldn't believe my eyes. 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 have carried this memory about with me. Yet when the War was over my heart was cold to the relief.

I was even aware of a slight resentment of peace. All the work had been done now, and it would pass unrecognised. Too many people had been involved 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, who had seen and who hadn't. All sorts of people with proud chests would step forward now---like the Jewish Brigade which had replaced us as commanders of a prisoner-of-war camp full of SS troops, near Udine 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 had won the War. And this Brigade had escaped the War entirely! That was the sort of bitter thing that happened.

I spent little time at the headquarters, and we drove back slowly. It was a fine morning and we had just come into the wide avenue on the outskirts of Graz which led back to Maria Trost. There was a large bend in the road, then we could see the first green hills near the village. But just as we began to turn this bend I saw two figures strolling along on the right,

both of them dressed in British uniform but clearly not soldiers. I was suddenly furious. They had no shoulder markings, no signs of rank, no divisional badges, nor caps. 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 the streets in our uniform, which had the mark and stigma on it. They had 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 quite meaningless, and all distinctions vanish.

The car stopped at the kerb quite close to them. They were young, with fair hair, and quite clearly not English or American. Theywere 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 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 couldn't understand, and I repeated my question in an equally loud voice, glaring at them. One of the young men blushed, and his eyes seemed to grow strange sightless in a most ~~strange~~ way. But I went on shouting. Where did they get those uniforms? They ~~seemed~~ to bump together as they stood on the pavement. I noticed for the first time that they had rather shy, delicate faces. They could have been students. But I thought again of the war in Italy, and the imposture of peace, and I didn't care. 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 expected them to behave in a surly way, as local people often did towards the western, democratic armies. I had never known this look of spell-bound horror to be 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?" ~~"What...?"~~

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, 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 I have never forgotten.

Rome, 1964.