

A RAY OF HOPE IN GERMANY  
BY

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TRUE to his pagan, military code, the SS officer was a full Nazi, even in defeat. He was haughty, even truculent, and stayed with his SS men apart from the amorphous mob of German *Wehrmacht* prisoners. When casually asked by an American soldier how he felt about the defeat, he did not accept the role of a prisoner being questioned; he lectured: "You Americans have not won. You are only deceiving yourselves. We have suffered a defeat but we shall rally again and beat you in another war. You think you have crushed us, but we will show you one day that we have not been completely defeated."

Furthermore, when shown pictures of concentration-camp victims, he showed no sorrow, no sympathy. It was a regrettable necessity. This callousness so infuriated an old soldier that he threatened the SS officer with his M1 rifle.

"You wish to kill me? Why certainly you can," he said, as he theatrically opened his overcoat and stood erect. "I am your prisoner of war and you can do with me what you wish. I am not at all afraid to die and you cannot frighten me."

He was playing the same role in defeat that he had played before and during the war. He was not only playing it out to the bitter end of the tragedy, but even after it. His unit had surrendered, together with a whole army, five days before V-E day. He was not a part of the ultra-fanatical SS groups sent for the mythical last stand in the south of Germany—he was simply a typical SS officer. He had been proud before the war, courageous and cruel in the war, sullen and haughty when captured. One unknown thing about his character remained—how will he be in national defeat. He had seemed to answer that by his conduct and it seemed to leave no room for optimism.

About two weeks later, after all the German prisoners had been located in camps, I received a request to say a Mass for the SS camp. I had been busy arranging Mass for the other German camps and, impressed by my past experiences with the SS, had thought of them only in terms of long, era-like missionary endeavour; SS men had been practically forbidden to attend any religious services. Agreeably surprised, but a trifle incredulous, I promised to say Mass for them on Sunday afternoon at 4.15.

There were about 1,800 men in the camp, many of them former

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members of the Latvian and Flemish Legions, men recruited to fight exclusively against the Russians and not against the Western Allies. But all were *Waffen-SS*, soldier-SS as distinguished from the SS who were used only for guarding concentration camps and like institutions.

At four o'clock I arrived at the SS camp. A Lieutenant Colonel waited, drawn up at "braced" attention. "All is ready for Catholic worship," he snapped, as though giving an order. SS discipline is the quintessence of military discipline and, now that the SS had lost its military power, it was clinging more desperately to its discipline as the last remnant of its former greatness. We set off at a crisp pace through the camp, and shortly came to the site selected for Mass.

About 650 men were drawn up in a rigid formation. As we approached, they froze in an even greater degree of attention. This rigidity was the complete opposite to what I wished, so I asked the Lieutenant Colonel to put them at rest. They snapped to a rest position that was scarcely less rigid. Still unsatisfied, I turned my attention to preparing for Mass.

There was no altar, no table for an altar. It soon developed that they had been away from Catholicism so long that they had, for the moment, forgotten that an altar was needed.

A quick order sent two men headlong for a table-altar. This gave me an opportunity to reduce this formation of icicles to something that resembled humanity. Knowing the German penchant for singing during Mass, I asked in a loud voice: "Who will volunteer to lead the singing?"

There was an uneasy shuffle, but no one dared to break the formation and respond informally. The Lieutenant Colonel took over, sent two men along the formation collecting data from the men who had had choir work. Soon three candidates were selected and presented; they reported to me as though they were volunteers for a military mission. One was elected. That gave us a choirmaster but it did not give us any appreciable break in the formation.

By this time the table, or altar, was set up and I prepared for Mass. Fortunately, a strong breeze was blowing. This was an excellent excuse for me to order all the men to form a close semi-circle around the altar to act as a windbreak. There is no order or military formation designed for such a purpose and so the men had to break formation and assemble in a tight arc around the altar.

At last we had a congregation instead of a military formation.

I asked for volunteers to serve Mass and, after much hesitation,

two came forward—a German and a young Flemish fellow, a member of the Flemish Legion. They had once been altar boys, but practically their only remembrance of their duties was that they were to stand at some distance behind the priest.

Mass was begun. The choirmaster led the men in a very shaky rendition of a hymn. Voices would sing a well remembered line strongly and then would trail off into silence; the hymn would be rescued by those who had started falteringly, but who had gradually regained their memory. The choirmaster, true to the duty of his profession, sang bravely, even when he had forgotten the words and music. Once a choirmaster, always a choirmaster.

After the Gospel, I announced that the Mass was being offered for their fallen comrades and for their families. The older men began to show emotion which, as ever, spread to all ages and ranks. I seized this opportunity to give a little sermon: "I speak to you as a Catholic priest, who is also a Paratroop Chaplain. We have seen your courage in battle. We hope that you, who have given an example of strength in battle, will give an example of courage in re-building a peaceful world in Germany. Germany is now in ruins, and her future depends on the courage her old soldiers show in creating a peaceful Germany. Today is the Feast of Pentecost, the Feast which commemorates the descent of the Holy Ghost upon the Apostles when He brought light and strength to them. May He descend upon you today with the same gifts. God bless you and your families."

Everyone present received Holy Communion. They came up hesitatingly, as though long unused to receiving, almost like converts making their First Communion, but they received with marked devotion. It was a strange sensation to give Holy Communion to men in the uniform of a corps that had practically forbidden its men ever to enter a church while wearing that uniform. Several times my outstretched hand almost instinctively recoiled from giving Holy Communion when my eyes noticed the SS insignia on the collars of the uniform. These were the men who would never surrender, who were taken only when seriously wounded, who preferred death to capture. I felt a distinct kinship with Ananias ministering to the penitent Saul of Tarsus, former persecutor of the Church.

At the end of Mass, as a substitute for the prayers, I asked them to sing *Grosser Gott*, the German equivalent of *Holy God We Praise Thy Name*. It came out full and strong, with the gusto that men, who have returned to God, can give—heavy, vibrant tones

that rang through the forest like a pledge of resurrection for the Church.

At the end of the hymn there was not a dry eye in the crowd, not a shred of haughty bearing, not a suggestion of arrogance in that group of SS men who had once been the most disciplined and savage soldiers on the Continent, whose insignia was the emblem of irreligion and pride. But it was the feast of Pentecost, 1945.

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#### POST - WAR JEWRY

ONE thing is certain: the total population of the Jewish people has been considerably reduced. For the last twenty years it has been customary to reckon this roughly at sixteen millions, now the two or three millions ruthlessly and wantonly done to death by demons, will have to be subtracted. This ghastly process cannot be regarded as a winnowing; as the avowed intention has not been to eliminate undesirable elements, but to exterminate all who could, in the widest stretch of the term, be designated Jews. *Non licet esse vos* has been the guiding principle. The arch-fiends who adopted this worse than barbaric policy have not been able to carry out their fell design to the full; but their failure is not due to any lack of malice: they have made a desperate attempt and seem to have been backed by diabolic assistance. The account of a Rabbi-survivor—one of a tiny remnant—rescued from the Theresienstadt Concentration Camp, published in *The Times*, of June 21st, 1945, is a lurid, but exact summary, of the nightmare horrors perpetrated there until the Nazis were forced to relinquish their grip on Bavaria. In this Ghetto, as he styles it—compared with which the worst mediaeval ghetto was an earthly paradise—it was normal that there should be at least a hundred burials, or burnings, a day, most of these the result of what was morally murder. During his three years as an inmate of this inferno, he estimates that fifty-five thousand perished. Such a violation of the primary instincts of human decency has already suffered a nemesis which, though severe, is mild compared with the crimes that provoked it. But the mills of God have only commenced their work of retribution.

In stressing this one set of victims of homicidal maniacs we are not for a moment claiming—nor will they—that Jews are the only sufferers. God, who has chosen individuals to testify to their faith in the shedding of their blood, has also willed to have nations dedicated to martyrdom: Poland, Ireland, Armenia and Assyria, are notable examples. Nor would any critical student of history