

transformations, to speak the unspeakable and to bring deeply hidden things nearer to the light. And these remarks constitute only an inadequate attempt to do so. For hundreds of years God had spoken to Austrian Catholics in the language of peace. Since the end of the Age of Enlightenment the Church had remained secure, taken all in all, from evil-intentioned encroachments on the part of the State and lived its own life undisturbed, with open support from the State in earlier days and later in an atmosphere of neutrality, more benevolent than not. Its prayer, *ut ecclesia tua in secura tibi seruiat libertate*, had been fulfilled without ever bringing about its sanctification. It had ceased to comprehend those words about peace. And so God, who speaks to us in many different ways, spoke in the language of war and affliction. And now many have come to understand. With the help of his grace we hope that we may long keep in our hearts this manifestation of himself of which we were witness, so that we may now be truly Christian and nothing but Christian.

KARL MARIA STEPAN.

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## ON HOLIDAY IN STYRIA

### I

**I**N Styria, or at least in a wide region around the Benedictine house of Seckau, the first week-end of August is a pilgrimage week-end to the tiny church of Maria-Schnee, in honour of the Feast of Our Lady of the Snows on August 5th, this year Bank Holiday Monday.

A truck-load of sundry Graz welfare workers—*Fürsorgerinnen* proper and *Caritas* voluntary workers and myself representing the Red Cross and C.C.R.A.—set off on the Saturday morning, made a tour of the beautiful church at Seckau, and then scattered to our various billets. Three of us were staying at a neighbouring farmhouse, the bunch of *Fürsorgerinnen* were going two-thirds of the way up the mountain that night, to sleep in a hayloft and have a shorter walk to the top at daybreak. The farmhouse where we stayed was of the indescribably attractive small-holding variety, not lovely, rather poor and cramped, but satisfactory because the people were completely satisfactory. It is a one-man show, with wife and two daughters, one of them a teacher at the village school. The household is overshadowed by the loss of both sons, always a double tragedy in a peasant's family, and news of the second death, over a year old, had only recently come through from Germany, after the reopening of postal services.

There was a small lake to bathe in and a cool, musical stream

running through the orchard—it provided the water supply for the household. There was a charming hospitality, piety in the old sense of the word and good, honest garden and farm produce to eat and drink in exchange for bulkier but tinned British rations.

We went down the two miles to Seckau again for Compline-Matins and came back to bed in the dark, and at four the next morning we were called. We started out by starlight, up the mountain-side this time, and the dawn broke as we climbed. We were certainly not alone, all through the woods came calls and yodels, and people were walking some of them all night, in order to reach the mountain-top for the first Mass at Maria-Schnee at seven o'clock. We came out above the trees and saw the valley in mist below and the sun touching the first peaks. As we climbed the sun reached us too, and the high cold wind blew past us whistling and we seemed to be on top of the world.

The little church perched on its mountain peak was packed with people, standing only, it was almost impossible to kneel even for the Consecration. The Austrians sing in parts, unaccompanied, on all occasions and say many of the prayers of the Mass in German while the priest says them in Latin; it is very impressive.

After Mass we sat in the sun on the hillside and had our breakfast and so did everyone else, and meanwhile more and more people were climbing up for the second and third Masses. Groups closed in on one large gathering on the very top, musical instruments were tuned up and the usual Austrian sing-songs started. Everyone was extremely cheerful and the whole scene was delightful with all the bright native dresses and the heavenly weather. There had been weeping in church for many had come to know of their losses only recently (Hitler had his 'death regiments' for 'undesirables') and there seems less and less hope that the many thousands of boys missing in Russia will come home again. But they were healing tears on the whole, for Maria Schnee is also Maria Trost, the mother of consolation. Of our peasant family, the father and two girls were with us but the mother had remained behind, choosing to bring her sorrow here quietly, the day after.

There is a great plain wooden cross on a knoll not far off, a memorial from the last war, and from this point the view was superb, nearly all Styria was visible and a distant white patch was the Ancona Glacier in the Gross Glockner group. Over the hills to the east, not so very far away, was the Semmering Pass, on the fringe of the Russian zone, for it is only a year since the British took over, and they had the Russians here for three months before that.

We went down to our farmhouse in the heat of the day in time for Sunday dinner and the rest of the afternoon was very silent indeed under the apple trees in the orchard.

## II

I STAYED at the small farmhouse again, I had a room built out in the orchard, like a hermit's cell, and the apples bumped on it in the night. The teachers had gathered from all over Styria and even came from Vienna and Salzburg. Seckau has room, it has a big boys' school like Downside or Ampleforth, and it is an old tradition for large gatherings of students of all kinds to take place at Seckau in the summer holidays, on much the same plan as the Newman gathering at Ampleforth.

I went to admirable talks by the Abbot himself, who has been Abbot for about twenty years but is still only fifty. The time-table was rather strenuous, the teachers were expected to be up at 6 a.m. and from then on the day was full. The Abbot gave four talks on the Sunday which was also a silence day. I remember particularly how he stressed the need for children to be taught to look up to Christ the grown-up man, and to think of the Child of Bethlehem as the child who was to become that man, not as the eternal baby Jesus. For when a young man turns twenty and has only childish memories he will turn elsewhere to look for his hero. First impressions are the strongest, and on the soundness of these the rest are liable to stand or fall.

On the Monday, there were two interesting talks, one by Dr Karl Maria Stepan, Landeshauptmann of Styria in 1938, who spent four years in Dachau and has emerged an extremely strong, unshaken, Christian man. He spoke of how each age has its own special view of Christ. The Baroque Christ, predominant in Austrian church architecture, triumphant over error, Lord and Master in glory, was none the less too anthropomorphic in conception. Today God has been finally vindicated by history itself and good and evil stand out in glaring contrast. He said urgent and powerful things about the devil, for our day can only be understood as a vast conflict between spirits, transcending our powers.

The most fascinating talk of all was by Dr von Geramp, curator of the Folk Art Museum in Graz and the writer of enchanting Styrian fairy tales. He said the basis of folk-lore is the liturgy, and when the Nazis deprived him of his university professorship because he was a Catholic, he realised that they knew nothing about folk-lore at all.

There were a lot of discussions on the following days, also lots of singing and dancing, and one day's pilgrimage up to Maria Schnee, the second time this August for some of us, and again with perfect weather in a week otherwise uncertain. I went with my farmer's schoolmistress-daughter, Maria. She was particularly struck by a

passage in Dr von Geramp's talk, when he said to the teachers, 'If you want to make friends with the peasants, it is not to be done by dressing in dirndls and patting the children on the head, you need simply to kneel beside them at the communion rail'. She said that she was sent during the war to teach German to little Jugoslavs. After church on her first Sunday a little girl came up to her and invited her to come and visit her home in the evening. She was given a great welcome with much feasting and merry-making, and when she left the farmer said to her: 'Do you know why I asked you to come today? It is because we knelt together at the Communion rail this morning'.

Maria told me some very interesting things about Seckau. In 1940, at Easter, the Nazis gave the Fathers and Brothers a fortnight's notice to clear out. Curious things are said to have happened during that fortnight, always when the Abbot himself was there: a pane of glass fell out of a high window in the church, the Easter candle blew out unaccountably. As they sat together at a last supper and planned how they would come back at the first opportunity, a former parish priest from among them, a man who died in 1934, appeared to the Abbot and told him they would come back in due time. On his way out of Austria, the Abbot preached a great sermon in Graz Cathedral and everyone who heard him knew that he was convinced they would do so. He is said to have come to Austria secretly once or twice during the war, and one of the other Fathers once managed to get to the nearest town of Knittelfeld and crept out at night to see the distant towers of Seckau, so homesick was he. As soon as possible, last summer, those who had not died or been killed, returned, in rags, in mufti, in uniform, just as they were, one after another. Still the Abbot did not come, and they decided not to ring the big bell till he came. Not till September was the bell tolled. The French found him in a distant part of Germany and brought him by road to Innsbruck and then with all despatch to Seckau. The people came trooping down from the hills and wept for joy.

It is wonderful how naturally pious these peasants are. Maria told me that during Advent it is customary for them all, from miles away, over rough tracks or through the woods, to go daily to six o'clock Mass before starting the day's work. They had a rough time during the war. No new shoes for those who wore them out going to church, and constant supervising and bullying. None the less, secretly a nucleus of the students who used to gather a thousand strong at Seckau in the old days, would crowd into the kitchen of this small farmhouse, and while the big, friendly wolfdog with the terrifying bark kept intruders away, would talk and plan and pray and put new heart into one another.

RUTH BETHELI, *Michaelmas* 1946.