

AN AUSTRIAN IMPRESSION

BY C. W. F. NOYCE

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I HAD intended to speak tonight of the Himalaya, as I travelled to them in the two roles of instructor and of pilgrim. I have had, however, to steer clear of a subject which has been recently several times touched, and more competently. My own interest, too, focussed itself this summer by chance on Austria, on the problems which Austrian mountaineers are facing and the contrast with their Swiss cousins. I shall tell of no great feats or heroisms ; only of an enjoyment shared and of dawning understanding of a most beautiful landscape. I was bound for the continent primarily in order to attend two courses in German, one at Zürich and one at Seefeld, near Innsbruck. Nobody, I thought at first, could need boots and an ice-axe in order to attend a German course. These unnecessary items I had sadly decided to leave behind when a friend encouraged me : ' You never know,' said he, ' you may be able to make a study of the difference between Swiss and Austrian mountaineering approaches.' That was good enough. Off I went, armed with the tools of my trade, ready to face the ridicule sure to be poured upon the lonely Englishman wandering with his unwanted emblems through the University corridors of businesslike Zürich.

It looks to the English visitor as if the Swiss have everything. Zürich appears as a city of plenty in a land of plenty : shops stuffed with goods, presided over by smiling shopkeepers whose faces are unwrinkled, to all seeming free of care. To me, alone and trying not to spend my francs, it must seem at first sight as if the good Swiss were determined to make good business of us the strangers who had invaded once again their fair land. And why not ? If the greedy English must come, must poke their noses into the unwonted cream cakes or scamper off into the hills without so much as a how do you do, then they deserve to have good business made of them, nor will they resent it. But on their side the Swiss, it seemed, would not readily admit to any sentiment themselves about this so dearly prized landscape. Such appeared to me at first their attitude.

So then I thought, these Swiss are businesslike people. On a conducted course week end, to which a moment of utter weakness had submitted me, I passed the night at Davos, that pathetic city half hospital and half pleasure palace. On Sunday at dawn I tore myself free and roamed beyond the Weissfluh over the rock mountains. Poor Weissfluh ! As the highest peak and neighbour to the Parsenn run it has submitted to every indignity of poster placard and ski lift. In the luxurious hotels upon and around it delicious food is laid to tempt out the stored coins. And we are tempted, we visitors, but we break away at times into the neighbouring lonelines to find what we were

really seeking all along. The Englishman must be stubborn if he is not to be confined to his comfortable lodgings, and to the paths which have been so carefully marked out for him.

My last day in Switzerland, however, gave a glimpse of the Swiss as they have always been at heart, as the great writers have written of them. To begin with, there was the *Bundesfeier*. An hospitable Swiss friend had taken me, on the evening of August 1, to a hill top overlooking the Zürich Lake. It was such a hill top as the Swiss love : not too high but that it could be comfortably equipped with a little inn ; high enough, so that only those who were ready to walk could reach it. Here many were assembled ; at dusk the lights started, the bonfire glow on neighbouring hills and the fireworks that greeted us from as far off as Greifensee, that long lake north of Zürich, with its memories of Keller. At 10 the singing began, the *Bauerntanz* and the continuous eating and drinking which struck oddly in the frugal Swiss. This one night, they said, we celebrate the Bund. The Bund indeed loosens tongues, even the tongues of Babel ; it unites the voices of Switzerland, of the four tribes that go to make this small and competent federation. For about the Bund, they will say, we feel as deeply as you English about your Crown ; yes, and we like as many of the celebrating festivities.

We did not seem to stop drinking, that night ; nor had I known that it was possible for a man to eat almost without pause for hours on end. At times I went out, to watch a calm moon cool in sudden contrast with the warmth and chatter within, laughter and the funny stumpy rhythms to which the farmers jogged out their dances. Then I would go back, to ask a peasant maiden if she minded dancing 'englischerweise.' We got away with some difficulty at 1.30, for my train left at 7 A.M., and I must out on the next adventure.

In a desperation with books I had determined to plunge at the Tödi, 'King of the little mountains,' on my way from Zürich to Innsbruck. But a single Englishman has little chance of an Anschluss with most Swiss parties. It was pure good fortune which gave me my meeting with a Swiss, Eddie Stalder, and an ascent in his company. He arrived at the hut at 4 A.M. I was alone. 'What do you propose to do ?' 'I wanted to climb the Tödi, but I am alone.' 'Let's climb it together.' And we did, in an amused surprise at our good fortune. Eddie I found, on that sunny day, symbolised for me the true Switzerland, happy and free and generous. His signature is in the Red Cross and the charitable Pestalozzi organisation, the gaiety of Bundesfeier and the adventure spirit of the Pathfinders. It was a Tödi difficult enough for us under the icy conditions of 1947, but a Tödi sun-drenched with enjoyment. Only the thought of that night train threatened us, for then our sudden friendship must end. On the summit, a bottle of Swiss wine was uncorked in the Tödi's honour. On the descent songs of praise were sung as we snatched minutes to bask on yellow slabs. I felt a friendship towards parties met by the hill paths such as I had not known in the pre-war years, when perhaps I was

the tourist who was fair game in the land of plenty. It had been a good day.

The first note of change across the frontier is struck by the voice of the Tyrolese who inspects or may forget the passports. Here is no longer the practical tone of the Swiss, but a voice which enquires musically whether the Herr has not by chance something to declare. But oh ! poor Austria, thought I. How can that passport inspector still smile, still wear his absurd shorts and his even more ridiculous hat, with his land divided and his villages a prey to hunger,—for we had been warned that we should be living on the standard 1500 calories. But I arrived at Innsbruck and the people still smiled, still wore shorts. I came to Seefeld, and the desire took hold of me, a desire known only to those who have submitted to courses, to escape into this country of so obvious a charm and to find by experience whether that smile was real, whether it sprang from the heart or was nothing but the grinning mask of a death's head. An introduction through Dr. Paul Kaltenegger, editor of the *Ö.A.Z.*, gave me the company of Herr Rutscher, of Innsbruck and the *Ö.A.V.*, over a Sunday. We climbed together the Parseierspitze, the highest peak in the northern limestone Alps. There were many people at the hut, as there had been in the Karwendel group the week before. It seemed to be true then, the Tyrolese were still the Tyrolese, the death's head and the threat over calories belonged to courses. Soup and vegetable appeared without even a coupon . . . beer and song . . . much friendly talk. Tyrol was still very good.

On the Parseierspitze we lay chatting in the hot sun. It had not been a difficult mountain ; the limestone Alps, bare and yellow and fierce to look at, provide a surprising abundance of holds. They, like the Dolomites to the south, are of more recent growth than the hard core of the Central Alps between. To my mind they are bald, ungracious and devoid of life ; they are not redeemed by a snow mantle. But we had leisure to talk, to admire the distant Ortler and Bernina. ' When the Germans marched through in 1938,' Willi Rutscher said, ' I comforted myself that our hills they could not take away.' That was it, then. Any man can smile if he has hills, therefore the Tyrolese still smiled. He can afford to smile if he has strong legs, enough old clothes to win him butter in the ' Schwarz ' and warmth at his heart. These Austrians, then, whom we had seen, were out on a pilgrimage of escape into hills that was to preserve that laughter, to keep the cold from their hearts' door. These mountains were no practical proposition. Indeed they were the reverse, since there is no visible justification for a people in such straits to spend their days rambling over the hills. It was a temporary way out, I thought, into the world that they had known before war came. But it was a very pleasant one. We packed up reluctantly for the descent.

An acute drawback to language courses abroad is that they attempt, often, the dangerous mixture of business with pleasure. To live at Seefeld, in the artificial atmosphere of a university, without wanting to be away over its hills was bad enough. To be bound only by a strong

conscience to books in this tantalising weather of early August was almost intolerable. But there were week ends. A Sunday expedition to the Olperer in company with an Austrian student orientated me towards the Central Alps south of Innsbruck. The peaks are harder of texture, rising splintered out of their complicated little glaciers. They are so accessible that a business man from Innsbruck can be off to his hut on Saturday afternoon and back home to supper Sunday evening. That in fact was what the business men were still doing; the iron spikes fixed in the Olperer's rock ridge were festooned with party ropes. Then the course ended. Luck put me in the way of the Countess Irma Schmidegg, who was free to come for six days to the Zillertal S.E. of Innsbruck. Now, perhaps, I might discover more of the secret of that smile, might make the further acquaintance of the mountain people. At Ginzling, where we arrived by crowded bus, a farmer guide welcomed us with his smiling wife and took us into a neat little house. We arranged for a rucksack to be taken by mule, while we reached the Berliner hut over the peaks. The wife brought from the cupboard that Austrian rarity, an apple pie. 'Yes, we had everything,' she said, offering it round and taking no refusal. 'Now we have nothing. We are very poor people.' I began to understand more. The Tyrolese had indeed had everything, that is to say they had had enough for themselves and for their friends. They had loved to give, they would be unhappy if they could not give, and now even after the calamity of war they must find some means of retaining their earlier habits. But how to do it? Next day we visited a hunter and his family on our path. The position of these hunters, so far as I understood it, is a peculiar one. They could be attached to an estate, and in the summer this man was in charge of the herdsmen who drove cattle up to the high pastures. Most of the winter he too would come down to Ginzling, leave his chalet with its picturesque carvings and work at the timber. For there is little to hunt now, the countess said, on these hills. A few marmots, but they are not in great demand, and anyway, how can you get cartridges? Yet what a fine fellow he is to look at, she continued, and how nice it is to keep him there, with his green jacket and pipe. Besides, he gives us milk and butter. I nodded, but I was full of curiosity. I had seen the butter ration, if it could be so called, at Innsbruck. We reached the chalet and the Countess undid her rucksack. One metre of cloth—a slab of butter appeared on the table such as would have honoured the proverbial pre-war counters of Denmark. The Countess heaped it on to our bread, or rather, like Winnie the Pooh, she allowed a soupçon of bread as a flavouring to our butter. Then on courtesy bent I offered the hunter a fill for his picturesque but tobaccoless pipe. As if by magic there appeared before us two cupfuls of creamy milk. The little stone-floor room, bare boards and bare-legged children seemed to radiate an increased warmth at us. I thought now that I understood how to do it. 'It's no use thinking of money here,' smiled the Countess. '*Tausch* (exchange), that's the word.'

This then was how these people of the valleys still smiled, still gave. Obviously the money system is absurd, say the city dwellers. The ration is still more absurd, a joke in fact, for no one could possibly expect to live on that. To get to our mountains therefore we must think out what we can reasonably exchange. Two metres of cloth equal one kilo of butter. An egg is worth two cigarettes. So the exchange goes on to the benefit of all, the Tyrolese peasants still smile and their hearts are warm and their hands generous.

The Berliner hut was filled with laughter. We all felt perhaps that we had escaped in one way or another and were walking the heights like truant but happy schoolboys. The countess proved a most competent mountaineer, the rock mountains of some 11,000 ft. round the Zillertal head were for me a fitting introduction. There was no rising before the dawn this time ; parties left comfortably at 6.30 and it was possible sometimes to climb two or three peaks in the day. Our best expeditions were the Gross Mösele by its fronting ice ridge, the Schneedreieck, and the Turnerkamp with ascent by the harder west ridge and descent by the east, in a thickening mist and snow. The countess disapproved of the mist and would, I thought, have liked to turn back. 'If you come to me in England you will climb in nothing else,' I said. 'Then I will not come to England,' said she, 'I love the sun.' And I, as if in punishment for pushing on and in token of mountaineering old age, found the greatest of great difficulties in getting up my own selected west ridge. The 'Reitgrat' lost me my ice-axe and the skin from my two knees. Then the countess disappeared into a crevasse on the misty way down, and the score of mutual banter was even again.

The like mixture of laughter with the silences of religious worship I had noticed in the other occupants of the hut : the guides who were spending their odd days searching for the parts of a crashed aeroplane ; the unemployed engineer who lived in a little cabin down by the glacier ; the two students who searched for crystals on the mountains and returned at nightfall, rucksacks crammed to bursting with unwieldy stone ; the three Innsbruck bank clerks. Perhaps the most interesting figure was the engineer. He was a young man, brown and broad and bespectacled. He could find no work and anyway, I think, was never made for the monotony of regular employment. When he took over the little shack standing about half a mile from the Berliner hut the glacier snout was very near, and in it were some remarkable ice caves. He made good money showing parties round the caves. But the glacier is retreating fast, as are all the glaciers in Tyrol, and the caves are no more. He now makes such money as he can by cutting wood for the farmers, and in the summer guiding odd parties over the peaks. But he must go cautiously, for the guides are touchy. We found him living with his wife in the one room, spending his evenings in a huge correspondence with persons of many nationalities which he regarded as a very serious duty and privilege. But it was dull for his wife, on the days when mist crept round and there was nothing to do but cook the maize, standby which the Austrians are coming to dislike heartily,

She sighed when we paid our visit of state to the 'Palazzo Venezia' as he styled it, and looked out of the window towards Ginzling. It was still two months to October, when they would descend.

In the morning we usually proceeded in a company along a path, reverently as the pilgrims to Canterbury. It was part of the rite, I thought, to lift our eyes solemnly to the hills and to agree solemnly, when we began to speak, that the weather might be good and that at any rate it was good that we were on the mountains. Then the laughter would break in, and the parties would end with song and yodel on their diverse summits. At the head of the Berliner hut valley stands the Schwarzstein, an easy glacier expedition. Here on our last day we assembled, a day of slowly clearing mist, and joined the three bank clerks for a continuation to the Gross Mörcherer. The sun came out suddenly; the summit was warm and welcoming. 'It is as quiet as a cathedral,' was the comment, and in our cathedral we worshipped, prostrate sunbathers, until it was time to go.

The countess unfortunately had to leave two days before I did. She had another appointment, on the Gross Glockner. The choice of Anschluss lay between the crystal seekers, one of them a former prisoner of war who could speak perfect American, and the bank clerks. The Austrians are not reserved about Anschluss, as the Swiss are said to be. 'Ja freilich,' said the senior bank clerk, beaming his surprise that I should have asked so diffidently. We crossed to the Furtschagelhaus in another valley and climbed the Gross Mösele again by his easier flank. It was a sunny day on not difficult ice. The junior bank clerk was having trouble with the novel art of crampon climbing, and receiving useful advice from his partners. At the summit the handshake, the reverent contemplation of the view. This time we looked out over South Tyrol. If there is one part of the Austrian religion which is fierce, the worship of a god of battle rather than of refuge, it seemed to me that this god fed upon the Austrian longing for the lost land. 'That should be ours,' said the senior bank clerk pointing. 'It is always sunny there.' I knew what he meant by this. Pamphlets had been showered upon my own head, by Innsbruck professors and students. Torinelli, said they, had been allowed to remain in office, Italy had been allowed to pursue her pre-war fascist policy. The cultural and social unity of North and South Tyrol was all too obvious, it hardly needed to be proved by the sheafs of statistics adorning each page. Yet in the midst of his outburst the Austrian seems to stop, shake his head and smile, as smile he must. His fury is in vain. 'We can do nothing about it,' he says. 'You must help us.' So we looked out at the bright sunny peaks, against a clear sky. Only above our own heads a cloud hovered. Then I left the three at the Furtschagelhaus and galloped back to Ginzling.

Two last nights at Innsbruck I spent with the most generous, the most hospitable hostess I could have found, the mother of one of the students. The family had been well off and was now hard hit by war and its aftermath. 'But we deserve it,' she said. 'Everyone despises

Austria because we didn't stand up to the Germans and the Swiss did.' I could not say no, for here seemed to me the final link, the answer to my question, how can the Austrians still smile? Whatever they may say of the liberty of a mountain people—and a course lecturer strove to assure us, the assembled foreigners, that Tyrol would never submit to dictatorship, be it from north or east—there has been in practice a sad failing. A few years group themselves heroically at the beginning of last century around the name of Andreas Hofer—and then nothing. There was little opposition to the German Anschluss. My friends may have retired to the mountains which the Germans could not take away, for I do believe that since their mountains are a refuge, they will not make a battlefield of them. They prefer shrines to fortresses. It is not for nothing therefore that the paths are strewn with chapels, the Alps with crucifixes that link their green pleasantness to the deeper meanings. But you cannot have it both ways. It is right that the Austrians should admire Switzerland, and their smile here is a wry one but it is still a smile. The core of what was once the most powerful empire in Europe would gladly now change places with the mountain state which has had the courage to preserve its independence, its happy smallness. Poor Austria cannot even preserve her own South Tyrol. The Swiss have deserved their lot. The Tyrolese, politically muddle-headed, have the lovable qualities of Mary. It is perhaps wrong of them in this modern world to practise escapes so openly, to face desperate situations with the equally desperate remedies which they swallow with a light-hearted laugh. But Mary had her good, which was not taken from her. Here in Austria is a good, which all mountaineers will acknowledge. The old guide at the Berliner hut shook his head and longed for the days when the English had engaged him; if only they could come back, the English, they would save Austria, because all peoples who love hills help each other. I felt suddenly and anxiously a certain responsibility. Perhaps he is right. Perhaps it is for us who see their good to lend first hand in the rescue of this people, so lovable and somehow so childish, to help them to win their mountain independence, to give some of that security which they deserve and which they would be the first to confess they are completely incapable of winning for themselves.

THE ARCH

By E. E. SHIPTON

SOME 25 miles west-north-west of Kashgar there is a small range of jagged peaks. From Kashgar it does not look very impressive, as it is seen end on and is partly obscured by a gently sloping, featureless mass of desert hills. But from the N. or S. the range, which for want of a better name I shall call 'Min-yol Range,' is seen to consist of scores of bold pinnacles stretching in long ranks