

BRIAN HOWARD

NOTES ON CIVILIANS AT BAY

Dedication

Now that you are no longer dead, or handed over to the Gestapo (as the whole Stadium-full of refugees was personally delivered to the Gestapo by the French officials in Paris, like a victory-present), I want to make some notes on the last miserable days in France. For you, for me, and for anyone who would like a few hints on the feel of a time when ordinary people (like my French friends) as well as the ordinarily persecuted (like you) are being betrayed. I have lived through a little two-month period when a great many of the most disagreeable and most powerful kinds of energy not only seemed to give up, but really did give up fighting one another, in order to concentrate on their true enemy—on the political refugees, the poor, the intellectuals, the religious, the misfits, the old, the ill, the simple, the thoughtful-minded. The civilians.

Since, I have been looking through the huge residue of our year of pain, waste, and frustration—permits, bills, letters to Ministries, letters from concentration camps—and I see that, before beginning, I must give vent to one cry of rage. This lump of untidy paper, and, above all, the letters from the concentration camps, yours and others, fills the whole room in which I am sitting with such a violent sensation of *useless* unhappiness, that my heart beats so hard I can scarcely write.

Who, who is going to be punished for all this? The answer is, no one. Then, will people learn from it? Will it teach people to behave better, to exercise power less dangerously, less readily, and to inflict less futile, undeserved pain? Yes. But at the same *rate* of learning as before. Not one smile an hour faster. That is what is terrible. And what is supremely terrible is that a lot of the pain will teach no one anything, least of all those who suffer it. Because they had learned it before: they had set their example of suffering before. This is what I cry out against most.

I am going to quote you some of the last letter I shall possibly

ever receive from K. You know how he and Hilde hated the Nazis. You know he was nearly seventy, penniless, extremely feeble, and a sensitive, talented artist. He was a naturalized Pole, and his sons, B., the brilliant painter, and young K., the writer on philosophy, were French, and in the French Army. Hilde looked after him, and Hilde's poems were appearing in *Mass und Wert*, the leading German anti-Nazi monthly. You know how long they had been in S. and that Hilde was also ill, and on a rigid régime. Well, she had not been naturalized, and at the end of May the French put all the women of German origin in camps. It was the only thing they could think of left to do, I suppose.

16 juin.

'Mon cher Brian,

. . . Ces lenteurs de correspondance sont bien pénibles dans ces jours tragiques; quant à mes douleurs privées je dois dire que presque chaque courrier, me transmettant des nouvelles de Hilde (toujours en retard, toujours trop tard), augmente mes soucis pour elle . . . et pendant que je lui écrivais encore, survient indirectement la nouvelle que tout ce monde est subitement parti, envoyé aux Basses Pyrénées, croit-on—où? Et quand saurai-je de nouveau, ce qu'elle est devenue, dans quel état elle peut se trouver, après un voyage sans doute long, compliqué, exténuant—j'en suis malade et triste à mourir. Et je suis coupé des miens, ne recevant plus de nouvelles, ignorant tout du sort de mes fils et de mon cher Paris, occupé, paraît-il, par ces monstres infâmes . . . Parlez-moi aussi de vous et dites-moi, si vous comptez passer chez moi, avant votre départ. Hilde avait reçu un mot de votre part ("enfin la voix d'un ami" m'a-t-elle écrit) tandis que tout ce que je lui écrivais n'arrivait pas à temps! C'est comme ensorcelé! Et presque je me fais honte de parler de mes calamités personnelles, cependant que des millions d'êtres sont dans des situations impossibles; je maudis mon impotence physique qui fait de moi un cadavre vivant. Croyez-moi, cher ami, j'en suis convaincu, maintenant comme avant, malgré ces adversités, tout cela changera, le moment donné par le destin; *impavidum feriant ruinae!*—verrai-je moi-même encore ce jour, pourrai-je tenir jusque-là, ça c'est une question à part. Peut-être survit en moi un peu de ce qu'était ma vieille race;

hélas, rien de leur force; pourtant je murmure, moi aussi, "jeszce polska nie szigineta". Je le pense pour nous tous, du fond de mon accablement—Bonne poignée de main, votre vieux K. Ce dimanche soir—16 juin.'

What do you think of that? What do you think of a time when *the whole of Europe has begun to write letters like that?* The end of this wise, saintly man's life is being rendered insupportable, and hardly anyone will know, and *no one will profit*. This is what I cannot put up with. The forces of evil, led by Hitler, and abetted everywhere, are torturing, first of all, people such as these. Moreover, the evil forces use the good forces, often, to do it with. This is what has finally wrenched my detachment from me. Perhaps I have said enough.

I don't know exactly where you are, or if you will survive. If you do, you will one day know that from July onwards, I began to fight the subhumanity which is doing these things—making K. write such letters—with *all* my strength. I first began attacking Hitler, for instance, when people in England knew nothing about him. Then I attacked him through the period when they were admiringly curious about him; then, through the period when they were bored with him. Next thing they knew, he was at their throats. But never did I fight systematically; wholly. I just talked, and wrote a few articles, and helped a few refugees. I never really *fought*. I now utterly dedicate myself to this struggle. In the name of your escape to Africa, which you always longed to see. On behalf of K.; on behalf of the civilians. On behalf of the innocent. That is my Dedication to you.

Lastly, some verses by someone we love, and who loves us both.

In spite of the truth of this:

'The consul banged the table and said:

"If you've got no passport you're officially dead":

But we are still alive, my dear, but we are still alive.'

And this:

'Stood on a great plain in the falling snow;

Ten thousand soldiers marched to and fro:

Looking for you and me, my dear, looking for you and me.

And this:

‘Intellectual disgrace
Stares from every human face,
And the seas of pity lie
Locked and frozen in each eye.’

I still believe in this:

‘In the deserts of the heart
Let the healing fountain start,
In the prison of his days
Teach the free man how to praise.’

Notes

As soon as I got well I left the clinic in Bandol, and went to Le Rayol. It was May, and the seeping advance in the North had begun, but in the South, in Le Rayol, with nothing but the motionless, aromatic bay, with no village even, there was, superficially, no war. Nothing but brightness outside, and the blackness in one's head. I was getting ready to go to England. Things changed on the morning of the 3rd of June, I think. I was standing by the dark, sparkling sea, which was like a face that had lost its meaning when three bombers passed slowly over me, very low, in the direction of Le Lavandou. I noticed they had no markings, and thought how clever of the French it was, and how well protected the coast must be. As the bombers passed Cap Nègre I was astonished to see three giant fountains rise out of the sea, and languidly fall back into it again. The war had arrived in sight.

When I think it all over, I see that the root of the trouble in France was that there was no news. The radio was managed by idiots apparently for idiots, and the papers were little better. The German and Italian kind of controlled press (such a press as France is now getting) at least excites its readers a little. In France the press was censored into nothingness. The papers did not mislead, particularly; they were just filled with nothing. There was *L'Ordre*, the daily (always too late) from Paris, and *La Lumière*, the weekly: these had well-reasoned, honest articles, but no news either. There was *Paris-Soir*, with, sometimes, amusing rubbishy scandal about Hitler. But also no news. It was so bad that when the English papers arrived, it didn't seem

to matter about their being ten days, or two weeks late. Frenchmen pored and puzzled in the cafés over one's old *News Chronicle* or *Daily Express*, and questioned one, gravely. The *Statesman* was like a solid meal to a starving man, except for certain articles on France. And that brings me to the point, the great point. Why did France collapse?

France collapsed for two main reasons. Firstly, because the whole Left was gradually made impotent, and this disgusted the Army; in other words, the most dynamic and watchful part of the electorate. Secondly, the mad Censorship. The extreme Right, e.g. the Fifth Column and the Money Men, were getting absolute control (everyone sensed this, whether they sensed it dimly or clearly) and yet no one knew quite how, or why, because it was impossible to find out anything whatsoever. Their getting this control either angered or at least gave a vague but deep sense of dissatisfaction to most French people. The rest simply remained sunk in their hysteria or indifference.

The things that did not *cause* the French collapse were Leopold's defection; Gamelin's incredible tactical errors; Weygand's coming too late; Germany's superior mechanical methods, etc., etc. Shattering though these things were, a stand could, for example, have been made at two points in Central France, one above Bordeaux, and one hinging on Switzerland. But then, stands are made with hearts—Tommy-guns only help. And the hearts had gone. So, instead, retreats took place everywhere, even into the trap of Brittany. These retreats had, as their underlying causes, the two great sins I have mentioned, which were really one and the same sin, because panic lack of trust (Panic Censorship) is one of the chief, guiding characteristics of Money Men. If one puts one's possessions first of everything, it is quite natural to distrust; to want to muzzle your indignant dependents; to want to strike a bargain with the enemy if only they'll let you keep something. All this had been ripening in France since 1936. And the tag about one's not being able to fool all of the people all of the time always shows results in France first. It always has. There came a time, May-June, when the French *man* decided that things weren't good enough. He wasn't a traitor. I don't believe many officers were traitors. Matters had simply become too puzzling, too gloomy. Orders filtered down from the Money Men not to shoot at the enemy, for instance, lest it

provoke them. I heard this myself from an officer who had been at the front. So large numbers of Frenchmen simply began to go home. Who shall blame them? If you are selfish enough, and secretive enough, and you blunder enough, you can take the heart out of an army with the greatest of ease. Particularly, I repeat, with Frenchmen, who are inclined to be adult, and on the spot.

Finally, this is why I disliked certain articles in the *Statesman*. If they didn't praise, they made excuses for the 'strong-arm' methods used against the French Left. All the French Government had to do, in fact, was behave sensibly, as the English Government has done, hitherto. And if we start the same game here, the end will be the same. It is no good saying that 'conditions' here are 'different'. This 'condition' is not different, ever, anywhere.

It had been at the end of May when I went to tea with a not unintelligent Russian woman and the Baronne de V. The latter was quite a friend of mine; she genuinely liked music, and painted slight, but fresh, little landscapes. The Nazis were near Paris, at Vernon, and the suspense was severe. At tea, the conversation so shocked me that I protested, but I am sure it was the *bien-pensant* conversation of all France at that moment:

They: 'Ce salaud! on doit le fusiller!'

I: 'Qui?'

They: 'Blum, cher ami. *Blum*, naturellement. Thorez aussi. J'en suis sûre que c'est lui qui donne les discours sur le radio allemand.'

I: 'Fusiller Blum?'

They: 'Mais sur le champ! C'est épouvantable. Il a volé tout l'argent que nous avons donné pour la ligne Maginot. Voilà pourquoi les Boches, etc., etc.'

Shaking with anger, their extremely distinguished faces pinched into masks like newts, they expatiated; and my vigorous protests were simply ignored. Then, suddenly, a French doctor in uniform ran up the steps of the terrace; a devoted, charming young man who was giving up his short leave to his patients. He described the German advance:

'Three million men are advancing shoulder to shoulder with their Chicago-guns at the hip. It is indescribable.'

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Next: 'Some parachutists are dressed from head to foot in pale blue, with transparent pale blue parachutes, and each one has a bomb in his hand, painted flesh-colour.'

The women: 'No!'

The officer: 'Yes, they look like something by Schiaparelli.'

More talk and tea. Then the officer left. He said, with a tender kind of dignity, kissing the women's hands: 'I never expect to see you again, of course.'

There was no more anger that day.

About the 17th of June rumours began that all the English had to leave France immediately. There was no reply from the Vice-Consulate at Toulon, so I telephoned the gendarmerie and the military at St. Tropez, and they said, in effect, that they'd never heard of such nonsense. Nevertheless, I went to Cannes to find out. Cannes, which I have always greatly disliked, had gone back fifty years: it seemed to have turned itself into a calm, pretty provincial town. The refugees from Menton and elsewhere had rigged their earnest-looking washing all over the faces of great, bullying hotels on the empty Croisette, and the rest of the streets had come back to life. For the English, however, it was a disquieting life. After Pétain's remark about our only having had ten divisions in France (untrue) French demeanour had cooled. On the 19th, Barclays Bank began loading itself into pantechicons. I had arrived just in time to miss the two colliers which were supposed to have evacuated Cannes, and therefore just in time to meet the first shiver of panic. The Nice consul (like the Cannes consul, and all the others) had gone, and, before leaving, had absent-mindedly burnt one or two women's passports together with the official code. This was a favourite grievance.

The British Legion and the Anglo-American Red Cross, compelled to take over the consul's duties, had their headquarters at the Carlton Hotel. There it was that I discovered, to my surprise, hundreds of distracted English. I have since seen snooty comments in the press about how they must have all been 'idle rich, and young men with wavy hair', etc., but such was not my impression. If one really examined them, they proved to be people of every kind, and the only dislikeable one I saw was an American woman who kept asseverating her absolute determination not to budge. She had a face like a weapon.

'We-ell, I've got the loveliest of all my furniture in Pa-aris, I know tha-at, but I got some *ve-ery* lovely furniture right here too, and I just won't go.' There was no reason why she should.

I had letters from my refugee women friends, in the Garage Schneider at Hyères, lying in my coat pockets like weights, but I felt sorry for these people too. Some of them were rich, it is true, but that doesn't prevent unhappiness and fear. Most of them were oldish; some were invalids; people who had settled down for good in a country they loved, with all their furniture and odds and ends that they had saved up during a life-time. They were going to lose all these things, and they knew it. That they were still there was not their fault, but that of circumstance. There had been no kind of general authoritative notice to leave. And I watched them give away their cars and houses to people they hardly knew with a certain air. Apart from this, they were not all *rentiers* by any means. There were people whose fruit farms had just begun to pay; people with little businesses; clerks, etc. Ruin, or at least the end of one life, was facing all of them; the Nazis were trundling down from Paris, and the boats had gone. I repeat, I was sorry for them.

An attempt was then made to hire the ex-Khedive of Egypt's yacht, but when, after tactful enquiries from Zürich, he discovered that the Axis had no designs on it, he refused his permission. It was things like this which made the situation exasperating, as well as alarming. The late enquirers from inland (not that everyone wasn't 'late', including those who had embarked on the colliers) could hardly believe their eyes, for example, when they realized that all that was left of H.M. Government, of King Edward VII and Lord Brougham, was the following frosty notice pinned to a locked and empty consulate:

'Instructions to Consular Officers in the Alpes Maritimes

British subjects enquiring about the political situation should be told that the Consulates have no more information at present than appears in the Press and Wireless. In certain eventualities the French authorities will probably evacuate the Coast from frontier to Villefranche. In this event, those British subjects compulsorily not evacuated will have to take their chance with the rest of the population. No special facilities for travelling will be given to them and the railway will

probably be congested with people wishing to get away. Consular Officers are not responsible for the evacuation of British subjects. The evacuation if decided on will be organized by the French authorities. It will of course be the duty of Consular Officers to give all assistance they can, to both the French authorities and British subjects. In the meantime, British subjects when asking about the present situation should be told that the responsibility for their plans rests on their own shoulders, and not on the shoulders of the Consular Offices in this connection. Consular Officers are warned that it is injudicious and undesirable to give their own personal views to the public as such views are invariably quoted as official, and may be in practical conflict with the views and intentions of H.M.'s Government.'

At last, on the 21st, the Mayor of Cannes announced that a special train had been chartered, for later in the day, to run from Nice to Marseille: a boat would be there. Everyone finished their packing. Twenty minutes before the train was due to leave, the Mayor arrived at the Carlton again. Softly and politely: 'You go, messieurs et mesdames, at your own risk and peril. A boat cannot be guaranteed.' This was the final shock which decided many people to risk it and stay. I myself got on the train.

(To be continued.)

W. R. RODGERS

ESCAPE

The roads of Europe are running away from the war,
Running fast over the mined bridges and past the men
Waiting there, with watch, ready to maim and arrest them,
And strong overhead the long snorings of the planes' tracks
Are stretching like rafters from end to end of their power.
Turn back, you who want to escape or want to forget
The ruin of all your regards. You will be more free
At the thoughtless centre of slaughter than you would be
Standing chained to the telephone-end while the world cracks.