

[*Land and Water* (Popular Liberal Weekly), May 6]
BETHLEHEM UNDER THE BRITISH

BY CLAIR PRICE

BETHLEHEM is still occupied enemy territory. The white, limestone town in Palestine, which is holy to half a billion Christians, is passing its fifth consecutive war-year without pilgrims. Formerly, the slopes of Khar-rubeh, under the fortress wall of the Church of the Holy Nativity, glittered nightly with the campfires of hundreds of Russians. But Turkey's entry into the war in 1914 put such a sudden end to the pilgrimages of the Russians that a few of them are still stranded in Bethlehem. The Crescent and Star, with which Selim the Grim hewed his way into Palestine in 1518, was hauled down from the Turkish *serai* in Bethlehem when the British army occupied it in 1917. Pending the dictation of peace to Turkey, Bethlehem is administered by the British army, and no civilian is permitted to enter it without British military permission.

Before the war Palestine was a noisome, sealed-up Turkish place, off the trade routes, difficult to get at and more difficult to get about in after one got there. Two military secrets, however, were revealed when the armistice with Turkey was proclaimed in 1918. One was the completion by the British army of the Palestine Military Railway. The other was the completion by the enemy of the stupendous Taurus tunnels in the *Chemin de Fer Impérial Ottoman de Bagdad*. Taken together, these two projects have opened new windows and doorways into Palestine, so that the winds of the world may blow through and anybody who has

the railway fare may walk in and see for himself. After the Turkish settlement has put an end to martial law in Bethlehem, it will not be necessary to take one's chances on the Jaffa landing. A few years more, and one will be able to book direct from the *Gare de l'Est* in Paris to *Bab el Hadid* in Cairo, with a stop-over at Ludd for Bethlehem. By the old sea route Bethlehem was 3500 miles from Havre. By the new rail route it is 2100 miles from Paris.

The first civilians to reach Bethlehem after the Turkish peace is signed will see a single line of old Turkish trench zigzagging like a white hair across the far side of the Rahib Valley to the south. They will see plenty of British soldiers, whose prospect of demobilization is remote, and little groups of British officers on leave, guided by the same dragomans who three years ago were guiding German officers on leave to Bethlehem. They will find three soldiers' restaurants, whose owners are Syrian and whose cooking is degraded British, consisting in the main of tea, hard-boiled eggs, and European bread. And if they have not visited Bethlehem before, it may not occur to them how miraculously the place has been scrubbed and scoured and whitewashed.

Outside of these things they will find no trace of the war in Bethlehem. The ancient, rock-hewn cistern known throughout the world as David's Well, and the small, domed, Moslem burying place known as Rachel's Tomb,

appeared in 1919 exactly as they appeared when the last of the tourists fingered the last of the Baedekers before them in 1914. The Church of the Holy Nativity stands at the eastern end of the town as stark and whitish-gray as it stood before it witnessed the most important event in its 1500 years of life—the powerful impact of the West on the Ottoman Empire. The sound of expiring empires comes dim with distance into the gold-and-jeweled silence inside the Church of the Holy Nativity.

Bethlehem is a Christian town. It is the most Christian town in Southern Palestine. In a country inhabited by 512,000 Moslems, 66,000 Jews, and 61,000 Christians, Bethlehem's population consists of 7000 Christians and a remnant of Moslems, whose number does not exceed 500. Just now a third element has been added to its population. I climbed back and forth through its steep, narrow, slippery streets for an hour without seeing any of those meek, fur-hatted figures one passes so continually in the Jaffa road at Jerusalem. Then I stopped a random British soldier.

'I see no Jews here,' I said.

'No, sir.'

'Are there any Jews in Bethlehem?'

'Yes, sir.'

'How many?'

'One, sir.'

'How long has he been here?'

'Three weeks, sir.'

He is a doctor, with the six-pointed star of Zionism on his khaki sleeve, who was brought to Bethlehem by the Deputy Military Governor. Bethlehem and Nazareth heretofore have not admitted Jews to their populations.

In a quarrel over a new tax levy the Christians of Bethlehem drove the Moslems out in 1831. In revenge for the murder of a favorite, Ibrahim Pasha destroyed the Moslem quarter

in 1834, since which time Bethlehem has been pugnaciously Christian. If Hebron has been known as a fanatical Moslem town, Bethlehem has been known as an equally fanatical Christian town. Despite the fact that Bethlehem is important to Jews and to Moslems as the birthplace of David, its Christians have refused to tolerate Jews, and Moslems have lived there on sufferance. The Christians of Bethlehem have quarreled repeatedly with the Moslems of Hebron. Long after the Turks conquered Jerusalem, Bethlehem fought them. Even in recent years no Turkish official in uniform entered Bethlehem except under a Turkish guard.

To Bethlehem, British military occupation has meant the final cancellation of Moslem sovereignty and the arrival of that long-awaited day when the Christians, under the *ægis* of 'the Powers of Europe,' would at last balance up a number of long-standing accounts with the Moslems of Hebron and the Bedouin. To the British, Bethlehem has been quite as ticklish a job as uneasy Islam; for Allah help the Faithful if the Christians are ever loosed!

Being Christian, Bethlehem is a very hive of industry. Generally speaking, Islam holds itself aloof from the trade scramble and sucks its living from its infidel communities, in return for the boon of life which their Western consuls gouged out of the Sultan for them. The Christians, on the other hand, have been compelled to develop a perfect genius for money. They are breeders of live stock and growers of wheat, barley, olives, figs, and vines; before the wines of Richon le Zion came on to the Palestine market the wines of Bethlehem were widely known. They are mechanics, carpenters, masons, and weavers. I have seen them reach Jerusalem early in the morning,

after walking up from Bethlehem, and I have seen them tramping stolidly out of the Jaffa Gate at night to walk back to Bethlehem, with a cold rain scudding from behind the Mount of Olives. I have seen them do it day after day, men and women alike, while the millions of money which poured into Jerusalem annually to keep candles burning enabled nine tenths of that city's population to live in habitual, parasitic idleness. The very name Bethlehem reveals the local reputation of the place. *Beit lahm* is good Arabic for 'house of bread.'

Hundreds of them have emigrated, consigning themselves from Jaffa to a Marseilles steerage agent with no notion of their ultimate destination. They can be found peddling lace anywhere from Hayti to the Argentine. Out of an arm basket and a five-peso credit they create bank accounts and fine stores. They emigrate as peasants in a fez and skirt; ten years later they show up in Bethlehem in a hat and trousers, and their former neighbors, who come in fezzes and skirts to borrow money from them, address them as *effendi*.

I stood one morning recently in an upstairs window of the old Turkish *serai*, which overlooks the quiet, colorful hubbub of the market place. It was Sunday morning and the market place was vivid with the broad warmth, the white glare, and the poppy colors of Palestine. Little groups squatted on the pavements, with their skins of sour milk, their sheets of native bread, and their panniers of lambs' tails on the flagstones before them. Goats and fat-tailed sheep, herded together by Bedouin shepherds, lay along the edges of the spacious scene. Far over to the left, in the shade cast by the lofty wall of the Church of the Holy Nativity, camels lay chewing their cud, their legs folded up beneath them like a jack-

knife, their bells breaking into a heavy tinkle as they gulped. Through the squatting groups and the herds the unveiled women of Bethlehem moved about their morning's marketing; their embroidered waists and their tall, peaked head-dresses of white and green — the same head-dress that the returning Crusaders brought back to their ladies of the Middle Ages — make the women of Bethlehem instantly recognizable anywhere in Palestine; before the war, a row of gold Napoleons with a throat-latch of silver coins was a part of their head-dress, but Turkish paper money drove currency into hiding and starvation later sucked it out of hiding and out of the country. Bedouin women, with tattooed faces, walked noiselessly about on naked feet, holding their handkerchiefs to their mouths. Donkeys and milch goats pattered through the crowd. A Bedouin sheikh, with a walking stick, dug his fingers thoughtfully into the haunches of a sheep and passed on with the flap of slippers. An *effendi* in European dress and a fez, with an umbrella in one hand and a chaplet of beads in the other, passed with a bearded Greek *papa* whose long hair was frizzled into a small knot at the back of his neck, just below his tall black hat. All of them were speaking Arabic and trading in Egyptian piastres. In all the spacious, crowded market place the only sign of a Western civilization was an originally field-gray Benz car, waiting down in front of the *serai*, with layers of white limestone dust that almost obscured the black German eagle on its tonneau door, and with a chauffeur in British khaki smoking a cigarette in the driver's seat. The East and the West are still as far apart as Bethlehem, Palestine, and Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

Beside me in the *serai* window stood the Deputy Military Governor in

charge of the Bethlehem District. 'What are you doing to Bethlehem?' I asked. 'In theory,' he said, 'I am continuing the old Turkish civil administration which disappeared when the Turk evacuated. Bethlehem is under martial law now exactly as it was the day we occupied it, and it will continue to be until the state of war in the Ottoman Empire is ended and a permanent civil authority is designated for Palestine. When we occupied Bethlehem it was in a filthy condition. It looked empty at first. For several days the natives hid themselves; the Turk had told them before he left that his evacuation was temporary, and that he would come back in three weeks and give every native who had communicated with the British during his absence a public hanging. When they did come out of hiding we found only the remnants of Bethlehem's normal population. Locusts, typhus, and Turkish paper money had thinned them down frightfully, and there were Turkish deserters, orphans, and starvation all over the place.

'By this time all of that has been done away with. There is plenty of food in the town, and the streets are as clean as you could wish. Even the street dogs have been destroyed.

'Under my supervision the natives have done most of it themselves. As long as the Turk was here the Bethlehem emigrants in South America had no means of knowing what conditions were like here at home; the Turkish military censor passed no news of actual conditions in Bethlehem. But as soon as the Turk evacuated and the Turkish censorship was lifted the emigrants were informed and began sending money home in amounts which rose to \$12,500 a month. To administer these sums most economically and effectively, I permitted the townspeople on March 4, 1918, to organize

the Bethlehem Charity Commission. They chose Khalil Effendi Decaret for their president, and, under my supervision, they did excellent work in applying medical and food relief. I have also permitted them to form their own town organization, with Sali Effendi Hakaman as president or mayor. Sali Effendi is himself a type of the returned emigrant.

'I am flooded with applications for permission to build. The Turk permitted no civilian building construction here after the war began, and the result is that everybody wants to repair his house or put up a new house at once. In some cases the permissions sought are of such obvious urgency that I have granted them, and the construction is proceeding under close supervision, which has for its purpose the preservation of the architectural harmony of Bethlehem. When the permanent civilian authority moves in, it may do what it pleases about the issue of building permits, but as long as I am here there will be no red tile roofs or modern windows or any other Western atrocities in Bethlehem.'

From the *serai* I walked to the east end of the long market place, where the Church of the Holy Nativity rears its fortress wall at the extreme eastern end of Bethlehem. Its exterior is severe and mediævally military. It is an instant reminder of Crusaders' tales. It was built to stand sieges, and its single doorway is so small that one has to stoop to enter it.

At the edge of the quiet, colored hubbub of the market place a number of British soldiers lolled in the shade cast by the massive church wall. A native lad in cast-off British khaki stood up from among them at sight of the *khowajah*, and preceded me toward the small doorway in hope of *baksheesh*, taking a greasy stump of candle from his pocket as we stooped to pass within.

Services are held in the church by the clergy of the Greek Orthodox community, which numbers about half of Bethlehem's 7000 Christians, by the Roman Catholic clergy, and by the clergy of the slight Armenian community. In each community is vested the right to the exclusive use of certain churches, chapels, and altars, and, in addition, the rights of ingress and egress through certain common ways in the group of buildings which make up the great church. These rights are laid down with meticulous exactness, and since, under the Turkish régime, there was no disinterested authority at hand to interpret and apply the vast body of accumulated precedent which prescribes these rights, it was left to each of the three communities to define and defend its own rights. Before the war, the title to the property was vested in the Sultan, and the rights of each community were vaguely confirmed by annual firman of the Sultan. The Sultan's government in Palestine was good, as Eastern governments go, and in all matters not affecting the collection of taxes or the keeping open of the trade routes it left its subjects to govern themselves. It did nothing to relieve the constant tension which kept each of the three communities at the church continually on the defensive, except to station Turkish soldiers at certain points inside the church buildings to keep the tension from snapping into bloodshed.

The small, outer door of the church ushers one into the nave, which, since it does not belong to any one community, but is used in common by all three communities, is as stark and forbidding as the exterior of the church. Its double rows of yellow pillars and its lofty roof are the gifts of long-forgotten kings and emperors. Its light is dim and its air is faintly pungent with incense.

From the nave one enters the Roman Catholic Church, glittering with hanging lamps, quaintly brilliant with sacred pictures, and heavy with the gold-and-jeweled insignia of Eastern ecclesiasticism. It is here on Christmas Eve that the Roman community observes its Christmas Day, December 25, just as the Orthodox community observes its Nativity Day on January 7 and the Armenian community its Baptism Day on January 19. In normal times the church is filled all the week with a curious, festival crowd of devotees, vergers selling candles, rosaries, and *objets de piété*, and strolling, staring, commenting curiosity seekers, guided by their dragomans and indifferent to the Masses being said at the various altars. The service begins at 10.30 o'clock on Christmas Eve and lasts until 2.30 A.M. The gorgeous drill, display, and repetitions, the marching and counter-marching of acolytes gleaming in purple and gold and floating in snowy vestments, the changing of the Bishop's gowns, slippers, gloves, and caps, the unending intonations of four readers droning the four Gospels in Latin for two hours — the accumulated ritual of fifteen centuries makes up this marvelous Christmas service. At midnight, an organ lullaby preludes the sudden folding back of a curtain above the altar, revealing a manger-cradle containing the symbolic doll, at sight of which organ and choir burst into a magnificent *Gloria in Excelsis*. Thereafter the stately processional of priests and acolytes, swinging censers and chanting, moves continually back and forth through the aisles and up to the High Altar, the audience sinking to its knees as the Bishop advances with the *bambino* in cambric and lace nestled in his arms.

Some twenty feet below the floor level of the Church of the Holy Nativity is a chain of caves, whose walls

are the living limestone, and whose connection is made by winding subterranean passageways hewn out of the living rock and barely big enough to stoop through. These caves include the Abode and Tomb of St. Jerome, the Chapel of St. Catherine, the Chapel of the Innocents slaughtered by Herod, and Empress Helena's cave, now called the Chapel of the Nativity and revered as Bethlehem's Holy of Holies.

It is dimly lit with hanging lamps, whose smoke has blackened its low stone roof with the accumulated soot of centuries. Its floor is encased with worn marble, and its walls are hung with unlit lamps, figures of saints, and woven silk hangings of silver, blue, and dark red — the gifts of penitent emperors. A first glance reveals a statue standing dimly against the dark hangings; opposite, a gilded railing fronting the lace-covered manger; nearer, the altar on which the Wise Men laid their frankincense and myrrh. Close at hand, two figures kneel silently before the Star, where millions of Russian pilgrims have knelt with dropping tears.

A second glance, after one's eyes have adjusted themselves to the dimness, reveals the statue standing dimly against the dark hangings as a British soldier, standing where a Turkish soldier formerly stood, and the gleam against the hangings beside him is the gleam of his fixed bayonet. Of the two figures kneeling before the Star, one is a British officer on leave, who at the moment is whispering to the dragoman beside him the amount of time exposure at which he proposes to set his Kodak. Before the two of them burn the six lamps of the Orthodox, the five lamps of the Armenians, and the four lamps of the Romans, which have burned for centuries above the Star. In the dull light they shed, the Star itself appears exactly as it appeared in 1847, when the proposal to add a second star, bearing the arms of France, brought about the Crimean War. It is a silver star, let into the marble pavement and partially encircled by the words: '1717 *Hic de Virgine Maria Iesus Christus natus est.* . . .'

[*Journal de Genève* (Swiss Liberal Republican Daily), May 2, 3]

AN INTIMIDATED BOURGEOISIE

BY P. H. AUBERT

BEFORE the war Germany was the country *par excellence* of order and discipline. Since its defeat it has become a dangerous neighbor for Switzerland, because of its disorder and lack of discipline. A few days' journey in Wurtemberg, now one of the more law-abiding regions of the former Empire, will impress this fact upon any traveler

who allows his vision to range beyond the lobbies of the fashionable hotels, the expensive restaurants, and the best railway accommodations which the country still affords.

Everyone knows that one of the principal features of Lenin's tactics is to create a 'revolutionary situation' by disorganizing economic life. His