

‘QUESMAT’¹

BY LEOPOLD WEISS

My journey is over. After two years in the East, I again feel the asphalt pavements of a European metropolis under my feet, and am conscious of a certain emptiness in my soul. Tramcars jangle, and automobiles thread their way dizzily through the crowds; men hop, skip, and jump across perilous street-crossings; huge department stores, built for the anonymous masses, vomit forth unceasing drayloads of every conceivable article that men use or misuse. Every person I pass seems preoccupied, hurried, worried, intent upon some pressing errand. Arc lamps flood the darkening streets with their glare, and factory sirens split the air with shrill shrieks.

As I stroll aimlessly through the hurrying crowd I crave the repose and unity of the lands I have so lately left between the Nile and the Hindu Kush — Egypt, Syria, Mesopotamia, Persia, Afghanistan. The people who dwell in them are not all alike. It is a far call from the Egyptian Arab to the Persian, or even from the North Persian peasants to the nomadic Baluchis under their black tents on the barren, sunny southern steppes of the Shah's realm. And the Baluchi is certainly very different from the Afghan. None the less, the moment we enter the world of these divergent peoples we realize that it is a different world from our own, obeying a different law which gives unity and harmony to its various populations.

¹ From *Frankfurter Zeitung* (Liberal daily), March 5

Once when traveling from Shiraz to Kerman in Southern Persia, my horse stumbled and fell. I received no injury, but the accident started in my mind a peculiar train of thought. What would happen if I, a European traveler in this world, which is so like a simple song, without beginning and without end, had been stunned by my fall, and had lost all memory of my past, and later had recovered and gazed upon the exotic life about me like a newborn baby, with eyes unsullied by memories of Europe?

I found only an indirect answer to this question, namely, that the very train of thought itself betrayed a universal European longing — to be born again, to burn our bridges behind us; no — to forget there are bridges.

It is often said that the Oriental has no conception of time. He dreams, he is passive, he is a fatalist and leaves the conduct of his life to an imaginary power. The Occidental, on the other hand, has discovered time and tries to conquer it and to make it his servant. Or, to put it in other words, he tries to control, to accelerate, the passage of things through time.

Whatever we feel it necessary to conquer and control must be something hostile, dangerous, alien to ourselves. The Westerner says: 'I am isolated and begirt by the world's obstacles and dangers. I swim alone in the river of life; I abide by myself in the midst of nature and of society.' That is the Westerner's typical state of mind. He thinks of himself as something separate

from the universe that surrounds him. He has extricated himself from his environment; he has made himself a symbolical and extraordinarily complex creature, a decadent tyrant, a longing tyrant — longing in the bottom of his soul, without confessing it, to escape from his lonely aloofness and to become again an integral part of the universe around him.

I shall not try to explain the causes of this tragic development. It is enough merely to scan the picture of the present Western mind, its ever-conscious antithesis between the ego and the outer world, and its constant fear of life, or, what is fundamentally the same, its fear of death. The Western man lives in a narrow circle of preconceptions. He looks upon the world as something hostile, something to be mastered and overcome. He must ‘fight his own way’ through life; otherwise life will master him and make him its helpless slave.

Thus the Occidental withdraws himself from the Eros, and denies the universal law of love. He alienates himself from other beings. ‘The starry heavens above me and the moral law within me’ have become meaningless to him. He obeys another law, the law of safety first. He is preoccupied constantly with his security — security against some ever-impending blow of fate; and he fallaciously identifies this with the instinct of self-preservation.

This distrustful attitude toward the world explains the spiritual discomfort universal among us. We lack faith. Modern civilization is therefore fundamentally defensive. Its greatest achievements, wherein the Occidental manifests his will to become the overlord of Nature, merely hide behind a brilliant façade this ever-present fear. Conqueror and conquered, capitalist and proletarian, oppressor and oppressed — they are rôles that only madmen

would assign to human beings, in order to keep them from realizing the spiritual conflict that constitutes their malady. On all of them rests like a nightmare the effort to escape their destiny.

Travelers, when they enter the East from the West, discover that an almost unfathomable gulf separates their conception of life from that of the people to whom they have come. What creates this gulf? We have hitherto had no precise answer. That is not because European observers have been superficial, or have viewed the problem unsympathetically, but because they almost invariably vitiate their conclusions by their point of view. We have been accustomed to look upon the Orient as strange and peculiar, and Europe as normal. We read the history of the world as wholly the history of the West, with that of the non-European nations as a mere footnote. We imagine that the fulcrum of Archimedes is entirely in the Occident. The man of the East — I am speaking only of the man of Eastern and Central Asia, with whom alone I have had opportunity to become intimately acquainted — is ordinarily characterized in the West as passive and fatalistic. We know how Mohammedan warriors despise the danger of death. We know that this is not due to contempt for life, but to a faith that fate has predetermined the destiny of every being, and that the will and the acts of the individual cannot change its decrees. But in fact no intellectual concept of the East is so utterly misunderstood by our own people as the Islamic idea of predestination. Europe laughs superciliously at it, without attempting to learn its symbolic content.

The Arab word *quesmat*, which Europe has adopted in its mutilated Turkish form, *kismet*, is a plural and means ‘parts,’ ‘shares,’ or ‘lots.’ European,

and some modern Islamic scholastics, interpret this as the fate, or lot, *imposed* upon the individual; but the normal Easterner conceives it as the lot *bestowed* upon the individual. It is this conception that explains the tremendous hold that Islam has upon the hearts of its followers. The Moslem interprets life thus: I, the individual, am enclosed within the wheel of life. I do not stand outside of it, nor should I try to control its movement. I need not toil and worry lest I be overtaken and crushed by the world, for I am part of the world and move with it. My duty is merely to drift with the current, to identify myself with Nature.

Thus interpreted, *quesmat* symbolizes a social relationship that transcends human society and embraces the whole compass of the universe. It is the only social philosophy that does not assume that the members of society are held together merely by a sort of contract to guarantee their mutual security. The moral authority of this law, which is so ridiculously misinterpreted in the West as a cult of indolence, has enabled the East hitherto to escape antisocial developments. For the Easterner also the world is full of difficulties and dangers, but these are likewise subject to the law of *quesmat*, and are

themselves part of the common stream of life. Therefore it is unnecessary and irrational to anticipate possible dangers and try to insure yourself against them, for they can never overcome you; they are only one aspect of Nature's functioning, and are working toward the same end, in a larger analysis, toward which you yourself are bound. That explains the 'calm of the East.'

This helps us to understand why the Asiatic peoples, notwithstanding their highly developed nationalism, their keen consciousness of a common speech and culture, have never attached great importance to political institutions. The State is not indispensable in their scheme of things—except in so far as it has of late become an agency of defense against the usurpation of the West.

The Occident is positive and active; the East is negative and passive. One has nothing to lose and presses forward; the other has a world to preserve and will cling fast to it.

It is hardly worth the trouble to ask which of these two philosophies of life contributes most to progress and civilization. Of course it is that of the West. But are we set down here in the midst of the mystery of existence solely to achieve progress and civilization? That perhaps is arguable.

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF SAN FRANCISCO SAVERIO¹

AN ITALIAN WORLD PILGRIM IN GOA

BY LUCIANO MAGRINI

It is not easy, amid the surviving ruins of Goa, to call back to life the names and the exploits of Vasco da Gama, of General Affonso de Albuquerque, and of San Francisco Saverio. The city of which Camões sang in *Os Lusíadas*, the pearl of Portugal's ancient colonial empire, the ardent acropolis of Christianity in the Far East, which in the days of its glory boasted of two hundred thousand inhabitants and was the capital of Portugal's vast possessions in the Indies, is to-day but a crumbling sepulchre, where dwell some three hundred Portuguese priests and friars, caretakers of the churches and monuments that still recall dimly their nation's former greatness.

A visitor asks vainly the cause of this decline. The priests attribute it to the expulsion of the Jesuits, to whose rigid political and religious discipline they ascribe the city's former power and glory. Laymen blame the intolerance of the Jesuits, whose fanaticism drove away Goa's merchants and diverted to other channels the commerce to which she owed her ancient wealth. Some attribute her fall to the lust and greed of the conquistadores, whose high-handed abuses made their stronghold a place of dread; in the shadow of whose fortresses, churches, and convents adventurers enriched themselves by rapine, but were unable to create a centre of

honest trade. As soon as Portugal's precarious monopolies were overthrown, therefore, Goa became, instead of a staple port between Europe and India, a mere memorial of old abuses. Her people deserted her. India sent its jungles to besiege her. Tropical vegetation overran her suburbs and penetrated her very heart; and malaria followed on its heels, to complete the vengeance of the East upon the unwelcome intruder.

All that is left to-day of the old town, or *Vielha Cidade*, is a heap of ruins and a single church, still in good repair, which contains the sumptuous and venerated tomb of San Francisco Saverio. The Portuguese fled from the besieging forest, and from the depressing reminders of their departed power and glory, and erected a *Nova Cidade* at Pangim, six or seven miles away, whither they hoped to transfer the seat of their political power and the patriarchate of the East Indies, leaving empty the great archepiscopal palace built beside the ancient cathedral, which speedily became the abode of bats and shadows.

On May 22, 1498, when the three caravels of Vasco da Gama reached Calcutta, after ten months and a half of navigation, they had been given a royal welcome by the whole Malabar Coast. A seaway around the Cape of Good Hope was now open, and both Indians and Portuguese anticipated vast riches from a commerce whose

¹ From *La Stampa* (Turin Independent daily), April 9