

The Flower Shall Not Wither: .. Wither

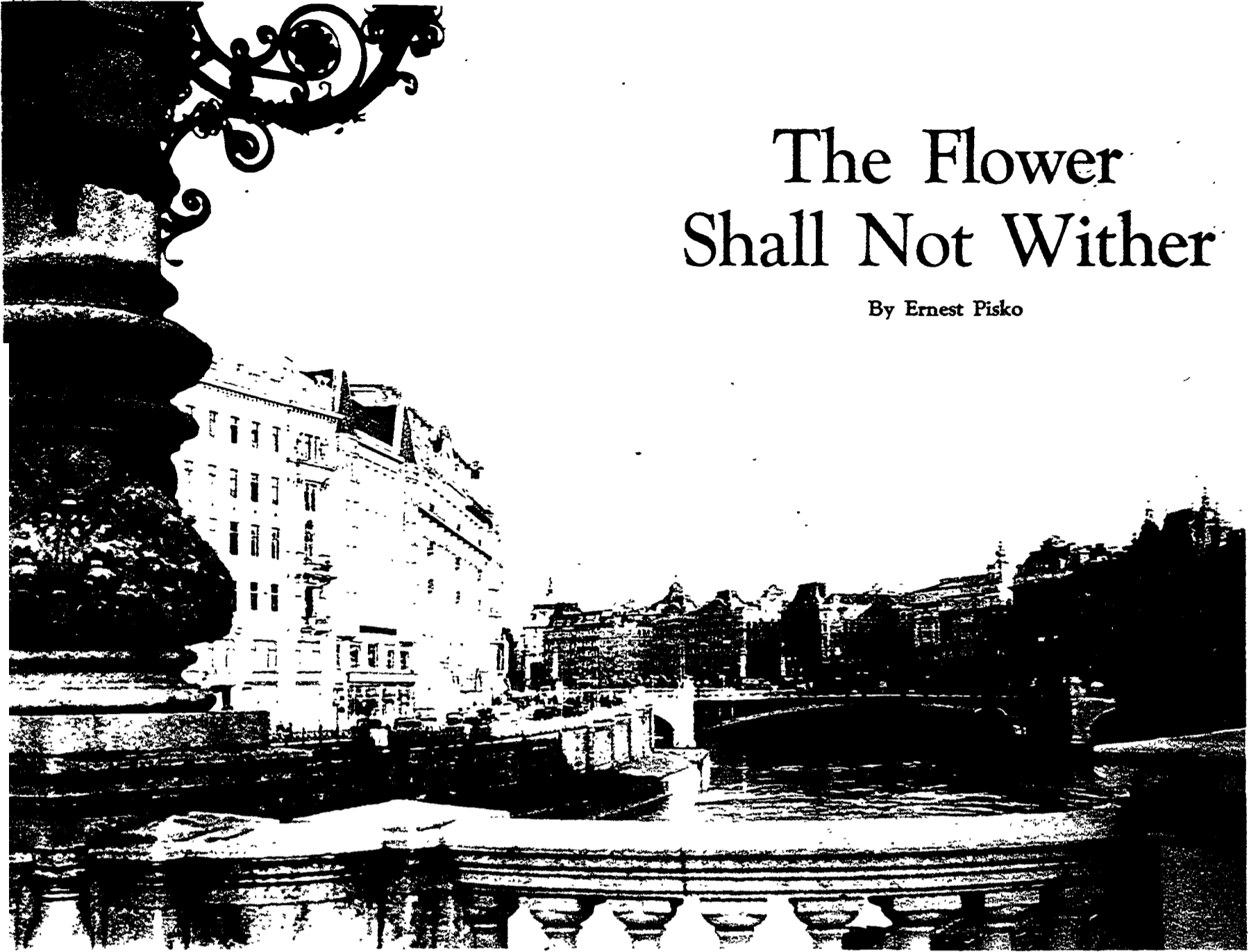
By Ernest Pisko

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The Flower Shall Not Wither

By Ernest Pisko



THE DANUBE CANAL IN ONCE-GAY VIENNA

© Screen Traveler, From Gendreau

WORLD OPINION about Austria's annexation by Germany—in March, 1938—was, and still is, that it was a natural thing. And the argument chiefly used runs "After all, Germans and Austrians speak the same language." I don't think that this argument has much value.

In his newspaper, Der Sturmer, Streicher, editorial mouthpiece of Nazism, uses the same language that Martin Luther did in translating the Bible, and Goethe did in his poems, tragedies, and novels. Could this fact induce any intelligent man to connect names like Luther and Goethe with that of Streicher? I doubt it.

Not the kind of words and phrases that are at one's disposal are important, but the spirit behind the words, and the use one makes of them. The differences between Germans and Austrians are so essential that for the vast majority of Austrians the annexation was either a blow or a disappointment. It did not mean—as the Nazis put it—that there was achieved at last what the Austrians for decades had been longing for. Far from that! It simply meant that by the efficient and unscrupulous German tactics one-fourth of Austria's population got the better of the remaining three-fourths.

There could be no better proof of this assertion than the way in which people behaved who, according to their "Aryan" race and official or semiofficial positions, were supposed to keep step with the Nazis. Time and again they showed their true conviction, their feeling for human values. I was happy enough to witness that splendid attitude on many occasions.

Leaving for my office on the first morning after the annexation I met a neighbor, a man of 60, well-off, who had played an important part in the illegal Nazi movement during the final years. I knew this and I expected to see him rather triumphant that morning. But when I bid him "good morning" in passing he stopped me and shook my hand vehemently "Oh, please, Mr. Pisko," he said, "don't believe that I agree with what has happened."

"Why," I asked him, astonished, "isn't it that which you were working for?"

"We never expected this to happen. Not Austria invaded by the Germans. We wanted to get rid of our government. We wanted nationally minded people at the

top—but not the German heel upon our throat."

I felt inclined to remark that even with a bit of common sense he should have known better. But tears were running down his cheeks and I kept silent. There he stood, one of the leaders of the Austrian Nazi Party—bare-headed, suddenly grown old, weeping. It was like a symbol.

A few days later I was arrested. After being confined in various prisons I was brought to an emergency prison consisting of two large gymnastic halls in a Viennese elementary school. About 125 people were crammed into each hall. There were no beds and hardly any blankets; and the hygienic requirements were insufficient. The food was just enough to keep us from starving. Most of the prisoners suffered from constant hunger.

But there was one good thing: The Viennese police force was in charge of the prison. From the beginning of the Nazi invasion there raged a struggle between the German police and the Storm Troopers on the one hand and the Austrian police on the other. Our police were tough fellows who had done a good deal of baiting and beating the respective enemies of our former government, Social Democrats as well as Nazis. They were willing to apply the same methods to the enemies of the new rulers. But they resented German interference with their business. They did not like to have prisoners taken away from them by the Nazis and beaten up by Storm Troopers in the cellars of the Secret Police headquarters.

We had a police guard of 20 in our prison, commanded by a lieutenant who was seldom to be seen. The actual commanders were four sergeants, one of whom had been a member of the illegal Austrian Nazi Party for years. We expected, of course, that such an ardent Nazi follower would do everything to make us feel uncomfortable. Actually, he was the one who had the deepest sympathy for us and who risked his position and his liberty in behalf of us.

I became acquainted with him, as I was elected hall commander by my fellow prisoners. One day he said to me privately: "I want you to keep a sharp eye on your people. There are some whose nerves are in a bad shape. When you

notice that some chap turns queer, you report at once to me. We must not allow any breakdown."

"That's all very well," I said, "but you can't blame the people for getting shaky. To be in prison is a new experience for us. Most of my comrades are intimidated; they are hungry and they worry about their parents, their wives, and their children. You will have more breakdowns than you imagine. And soon, I shall report them, of course, but better think how to prevent them."

The sergeant answered: "I can't send you home; you know that. Take my word, I should like to get rid of all of you!" He grinned when he said those last words.



THIS IS AUSTRIA

Suddenly he became serious. "What's the thing from which you suffer most?"

"Being without news from our people," I answered.

"Well, find out which of you have telephones at home. Bring me the list. But don't make any fuss about it." He spent hours telephoning to our families, giving them news and comforting them in the most gentle manner.

No visitors were allowed into our premises. Relatives of the prisoners loitered near the entrance, trying to get a glimpse at their men folk. One day my wife managed to enter the passage which

led from the hall to the office rooms. The first man she met was my Nazi sergeant. When he learned her name he sent for me and said: "Well, Mrs. P., you see that your hubby is alive and quite all right."

For a minute or two he left us alone. When he returned he pointed to my wife's handbag. "What have you there? Let's see! Did you bring anything? It is strictly forbidden, you know. What's this? Chocolate . . . all right . . . and fruit. Across the street you can get him something more to eat."

That quick meeting in the passage, lasting scarcely 10 minutes, was the only time during all the months of my imprisonment that I could see my wife and talk to her. What it meant to us, only one who has gone through similar experiences can understand.

When it became plain that I should go to the hospital the sergeant saw me to the ambulance car. He gave me his hand. "Sorry to lose you," he said, "but you will be better off there."

He gave my wife my new address by telephone so she could write to me. He said to her: "I think you two are just the kind of people that will get through this mess all right. You are stronger than all this circus going on around us. Don't give in, don't lose your courage."

Was this police sergeant and inveterate Nazi an exception rather than the rule? He certainly had more personal courage than most of his fellow officers. As time went on it always became more difficult and more dangerous to resist or even relax the regulations issued by the German authorities. But when there was a chance to snatch a victim from the Nazis, our police often took that chance.

During the mass arrests on Nov. 10, 1938, my younger brother was arrested. He spent a few days in a miserable emergency prison—for once more the regular prisons proved far too small. From there the prisoners were to be transferred to the notorious concentration camp at Dachau. On the way to the Viennese railway station my brother happened to sit right behind the driver of the "Black Maria." He asked the driver if he knew anything about their destination. The driver gave my brother a quick glance. "I don't know a thing," he mumbled. "But if you want good advice, as soon as

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we stop at the station you pop into the waiting room. And now shut up."

My brother did as he was told and was saved a good deal of the hail of blows that fell upon the prisoners on their way from the car to the waiting room. Either side of that way was flanked by Storm Troopers armed with sticks and rubber truncheons.

Also during the November arrests another policeman saved the life of a friend of mine, who had been taken to a prison where the Nazis in charge performed what they called "hearings." A "hearing" was just another word for a cold-blooded and steady beating. After that the police were ordered to throw the unconscious victims into the cellar. They seldom survived.

My friend was the last to be "examined" on that day. Already injured, he cowered on the floor. He was still conscious "Put him away!" the Nazis shouted to the policeman. Usually they watched him execute the order. But now they stayed in the room, chatting. As soon as they were out of sight and hearing he hissed: "If you care for your life, walk down the stairs by yourself! Set your teeth! It's your only chance." For the first step he gave my friend a hand—anxiously glancing around to see that nobody watched him. Then he remained at the top of the stairs, covering the painful descent of my friend by furious shouting.

Yes, there occurred queer sorts of life saving in Vienna at that time. And not only in Vienna.

Germany was not the only breeding place of Nazi-minded people. In the fall of 1938—after the Munich Conference—the Hungarian-Slovakian borders were the scene of the most dreadful events. I was involved as a victim in that man-hunting. It was a display of Nazi methods rendered worse by Balkan ferocity.

One night, in November, 1938, some 70 of us were driven by Hungarian soldiers into No-Man's Land, prodded by gun butts and bayonets. Among us "undesirable foreigners" was a little girl of three years, a cute mite with large black eyes, dark curly hair, and a sweet voice. She could not keep up, as we walked much too fast. The mother was small and in her early twenties, apparently unable with the burden on her arm to keep up the pace the soldiers forced on us. She stumbled at every second step and her breath came wheezing.

Each of us carried some baggage and each had trouble enough not to stay behind without trying to help her. Suddenly one of the soldiers took the child out of her arms. He had the tanned face of a Hungarian peasant, a brown mustache, and pleasant eyes. He held the girl like a man used to carrying children. The soldier next to him wrangled: "You fool! Don't you know that's a Jewish brat?"

"Brother," said the soldier with the child, "I have a girl of about the same age at home. Why shall this flower wither?"

Yes, I think that is the point: Why shall the flowers wither? The flower of that little girl's life; the flower of every single human life; the flower of humanity.

I often wonder what has become of all those people who—two years ago—struggled not to be drawn into the stream of hate. Are they still helping the victims? Or have they become victims themselves?

They were true Austrians. For the Austrians formed a human type of their own, just as they developed a culture of their own. It was a culture of heart, rather different from the German intellectual culture. And every Austrian, regardless of his class, had his share in it. The intellect can err for years and years on end. The heart also may err for a short time. Like the plummet it will always return to the middle line of understanding and justice.