

"Never to Return"

By Ernest Pisko

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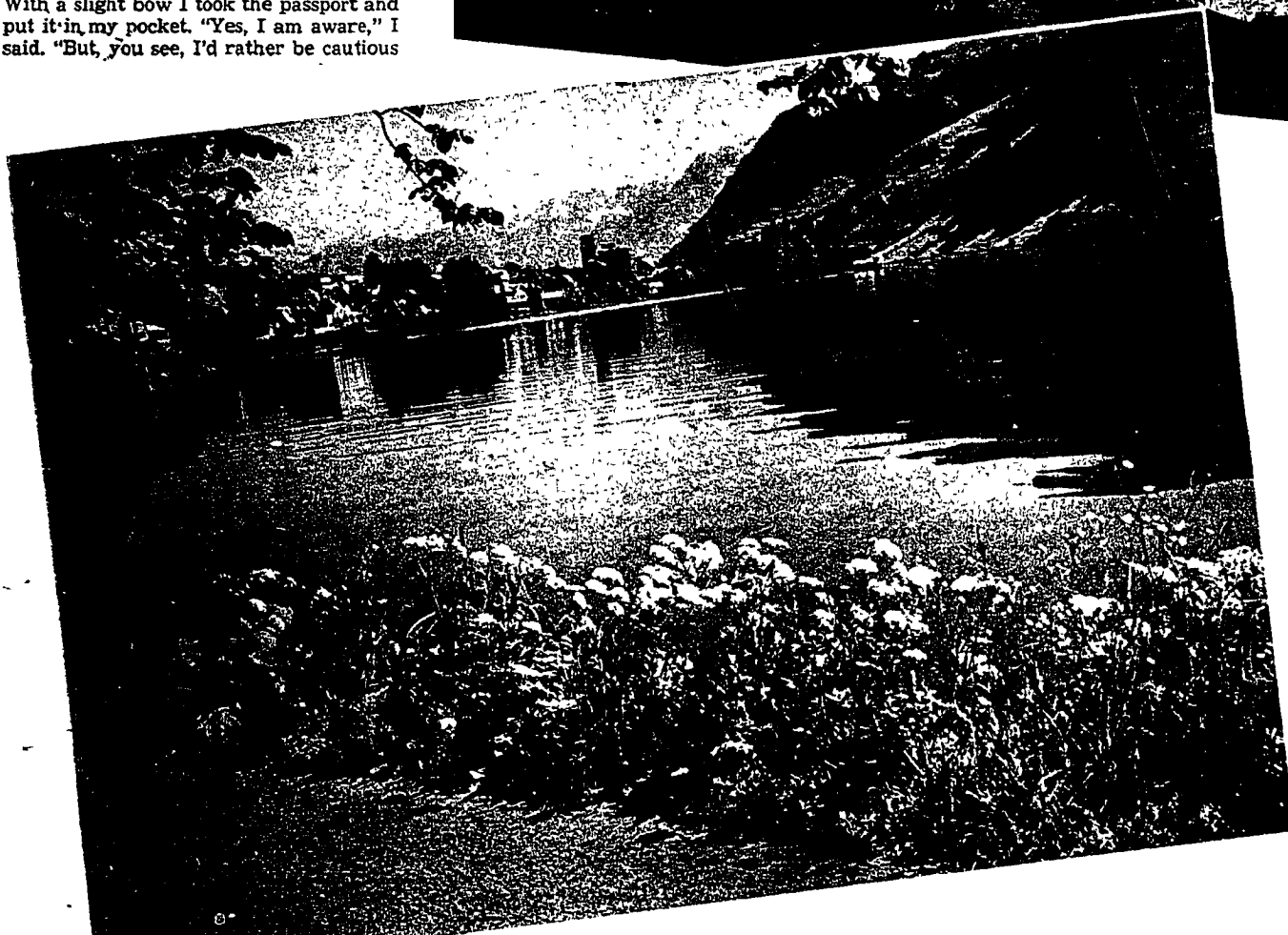
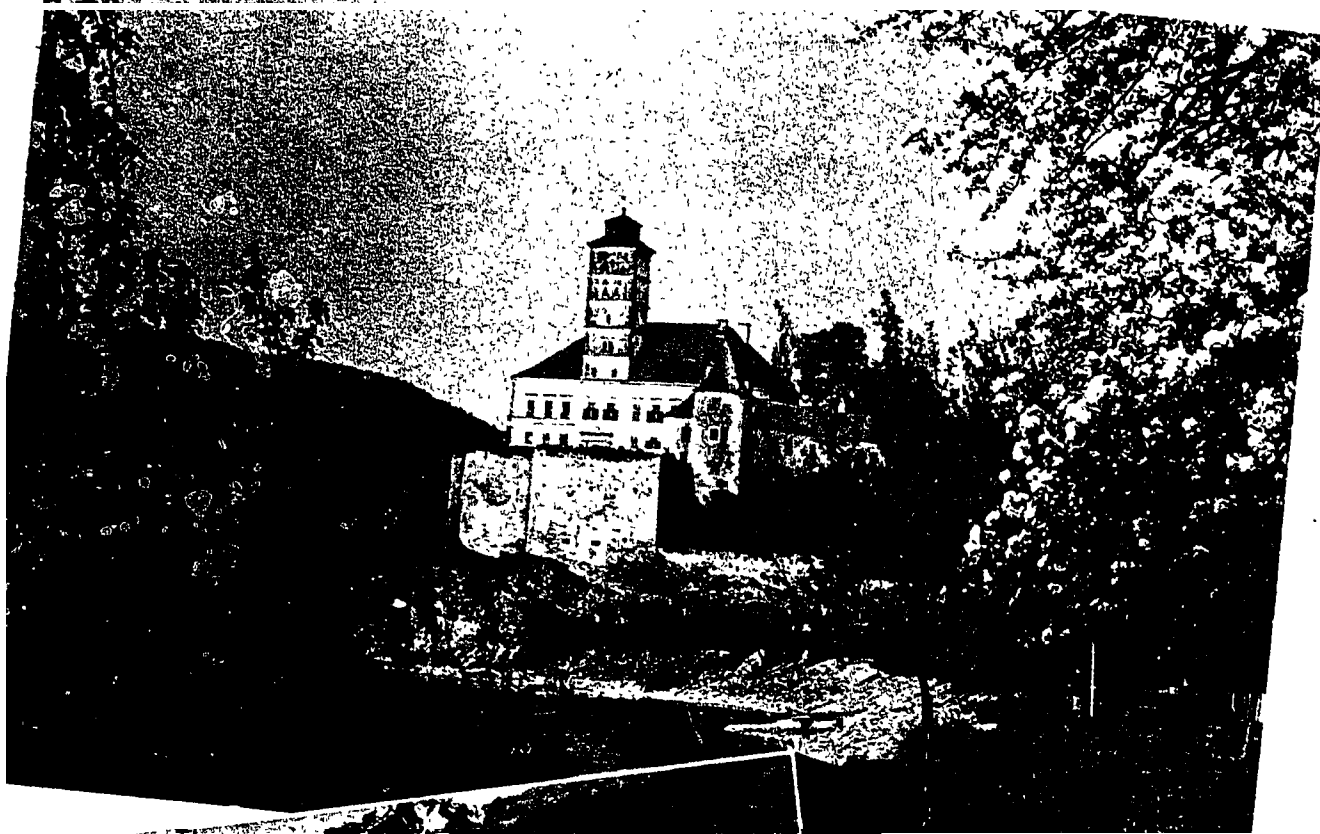
"Never to Return"

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"ARE YOU AWARE that you will never be able to return to Austria?" The man who spoke these words wore the uniform of the Black Guards, Nazi elite troop: dark boots, black breeches, and black jacket with silver stripes and small Swastika badges on each lapel. He held my passport in his hand and cast a sharp, examining eye on me in the train which had left Vienna an hour earlier and was to reach the Czechoslovakian border any minute.

Czechoslovakia was then, and for the next 100 days, an independent democratic state which had granted me refuge. Four weeks earlier I had been released from "protective custody" after having signed an agreement that I would leave my native country within 30 days, never to return either to Austria or to Germany proper. I had no choice. I signed. Besides, I had no other wish than to be redeemed from the sight of Nazi flags, Nazi uniforms, and Nazi posters as quickly as possible.

But in that moment in the dimly lit car of the train I resented that the passport officer had used the word "never." With a slight bow I took the passport and put it in my pocket. "Yes, I am aware," I said. "But, you see, I'd rather be cautious



OLD AUSTRIA

The Wachau (Top) in Bloom; Zell-am-See, One of Austria's Most Beautiful Lakes

Austrian idea, which ordered us to strive to develop a higher and more comprehensive type of human being than the national type which was the common ideal of Europe. I would not say that Austria always lived up to her mission. Most frequently she put in the place of the ethical idea of understanding the more practical one of bargaining and suppressing. But in spite of the errors committed by rulers and politicians, who sowed dissension in order to gather power, appreciation for Austria's historic mission grew steadily.

The outcome of the first World War put an end to the "hopeful experiment." Just when it looked as if Austria were ready to give the world a brilliant example, History said: "Too late!" Just when the Austrians had begun to agree upon the fundamentals of an Austrian education.

And just therein lies the hope—paradoxical as it may seem. Austria had to be dismembered in order to make Austrians grasp the full meaning of coalition. And she had to be invaded by Nazis in order to make them conceive how inferior the idea of national totalitarianism was to their own.

A short quotation from a letter may prove that my assertion is more than the result of wishful thinking. It was written by an English friend of mine who had lived in Vienna for years and had left it a few days before the present war started. That was in the eighteenth month of Nazi rule over Austria.

"You would deeply enjoy," he wrote, "the attitude of your fellow-countrymen toward the Germans from the Reich. Talking about them, they never use another word than 'the race,' and every single person I met told me that they were 'fed up' with the blessings of Nazism."

It should be explained that in Austria the word "race," especially when used with a certain intonation, denotes "morally defective people." So the very term "race" which Hitler has created as a pivot for his party program serves the Austrians as invective.

From contempt to defiance there is a straight but long way. Only a dreamer would underrate the obstacles lying on that way: oppression of free will, poisoning of opinion, incitement to dreadful deeds, and stupefaction; the shattering of all kinds of ethical and cultural organizations; and, above all, the systematic corruption of youth.

Thinking of Europe after Hitler's defeat makes one visualize a heap of ruins. So much that we cared for will be broken or polluted. Everything but one: the spirit of man. That can be silenced for a short time, its bearers can be thrown into prison, tortured, and killed. It can be ousted and driven from country to country. But it will return chastened and glorious. The spirit cannot be quenched.

gifts to the world's treasure of beauty, health, happiness, and knowledge. And who are likewise generally unknown.

The world did not take much notice of Austrians unless they were musicians. This is not meant as a reproach. Austria herself seemed not especially concerned about her great sons. The discoveries and inventions of Germans were Germany's, those of Frenchmen France's, those of Italians Italy's—but those of Austrians were seldom referred to as Austria's. They were the rather personal affairs of men or women who happened to live in a state which bore the strange double-name "Austria-Hungary." Were the citizens of that state Austrians or Hungarians? The Hungarians amounted to some 10,000,000—roughly a fifth of the total of the population. The remaining four fifths called themselves Germans, Czechs, Italians, and so on—seldom Austrians. What were they really?

They were voluntary and involuntary collaborators at something which, many years ago, a prominent historian described as "an exceedingly hopeful experiment in racial federation." "The experiment, namely, to build a state, not upon the identity of race, language, religion, but upon the negotiation of a general human quality; the only difference between men being whether they stood on the side of civilization or on that of unbridled, destructive forces. The task of defending civilization was assigned to Austria when she was founded 1,135 years ago under Charlemagne. That was more than a task—it was a mission.

All our great statesmen and poets recognized the unique character of the

—or, let's better say: spiritual reserves, because strength vanishes when the reserves are eaten up. Are there any reserves? And if so, of what kind are they?

On the whole, the same spiritual laws which are valid for an individual are valid for a people too. In either case the chances for future achievement are better if there were great achievements in the past.

In this respect Austria has one of the finest records among the nations. And not only in the sphere of music. Of course, everybody who thinks of Austria thinks of music: of Mozart, Haydn, Schubert, of Hugo Wolf, Mahler, Liszt, Dvořák, and Smetana; of Beethoven and Brahms, who became Austrians by their own choice; of Strauss—the father and his sons—of Millöcker, Suppe, Lehar, and Kálman. They all were citizens of that realm that extended from the Adriatic Sea in the south to the Russian border in the north. Nearly a dozen languages were spoken in that realm and there were practically no white peoples—except the Scandinavians and the Anglo-Saxons—who had not contributed to the shaping of the Austrian man.

"Music" spelled the label impressed upon Austrians by world consensus. The enthusiasm for Austria's music was so great that few persons abroad cared for its accomplishments in other fields. And there were many accomplishments of the first order.

These few names are taken at random. It is by no means a difficult task for anyone who knows Austria to name 100 persons who have added the most precious

with big words like 'never.' In these days you never can tell what will happen."

The officer stared at me. Then his eyes swept the corridor. Nobody was overhearing. Suddenly his face lost its official expression—he smiled. "That's right! You never can tell. *Glückliche Reise*"—happy journey! He raised his hand in a gesture which was a combination of the Nazi and the former Austrian military salute and proceeded to the next wagon.

Thus I parted with Austria. For ever?

Most of the 200,000 or 300,000 individuals who left Germany and Austria in the last years would not think of going back. To them the old country is a torture place from which they have escaped. But there are a few who think of it as a lost paradise, and nourish the dream of returning.

Which of these groups is correct? I know Germany proper only through occasional visits. I was not reared there. Like my ancestors for centuries, I was born and brought up in Austria. Even if one felt entitled to say that Austria was a paradise before Hitler's invasion—which to me would be utterly untrue—nobody could deny that she has changed adversely since that day.

Thus the one important question arises: "What are the prospects that Austria will change once more, and at that time for the better? That she will recover from the harm which the years of Nazi rule will have done to her?"

The answer to that depends upon our evaluation of Austria's spiritual strength