E X O D U S

HAMBURG

1947

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EXODUS HAMBURG 1947

Through the night I patrolled the quayside where the three white ships lay. The only sounds from the ships were the usual hissings, creakings and splashings. In the belly of each ship there were cages; and the cages were full of silent Jews.

I was in charge of an overnight guard placed near the ships, though what we were to guard against was not made clear. It was unlikely that our task was to stop the Jews escaping since they had already refused to set foot on German soil. So it seemed that we were there to prevent unauthorised access to the ships and their cargo. This would also explain the explosions which recurred at regular intervals all night. There was an osmosis in the army by which information filtered through to those who knew nothing from those who knew something. In this way we gathered that the explosions were caused by our Military Police who were out on the Elbe in an old German E-Boat, tossing hand grenades into the water. This was to deter any neo-Nazi group which might be planning to complete the Final Solution with limpet mines. A likely story.

I paced back and forth along the quay. The putative E-Boat, unseen in the dark, sailed to and fro and made bangs. Under my feet, along a ledge below the lip of the quayside, rats ran in ceaseless contraflow. Nothing else moved until the morning, and the Jews were silent.

The Unfortunate People

These unfortunate people, said the Staff Officer, were jumping the queue. Migrants could only be allowed into Palestine in stages. These people were pushing in and making others wait longer. They had been intercepted by the Royal Navy, transferred to British ships and offered temporary camps in Cyprus until their turn came; but they would not disembark. So they had to be brought back to Hamburg.

The Battalion had been paraded a day or two before to hear this. It was spoken with the authority of a man of high rank with red tabs on his tunic and a red band round his hat, perhaps in order to mollify the misgivings of squeamish soldiers. If so, he will have had some success. "Queue-jumpers" received no sympathy from our people in those days. In any case, we knew that British servicemen were being killed by Jewish extremists in Palestine. This gave a sort of legitimacy, to the anti-semitic feelings which were endemic at that time and which had not yet been modified by stories of the death camps. The words "holocaust" and "shoa" had not been given their special meaning, and the enormity of what had happened had penetrated no further than the tops of our heads.

There was certainly no evidence of squeamishness in the Officers' Mess that night. When I said that I felt sorry for the Jews no one concurred. One officer declared that it was a pity Hitler didn't finish off all of them. I doubt if any of the others would have gone as far as that but no-one, including me, challenged that odious statement.

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The Jews refused to disembark. In a last attempt to persuade them the Battalion staged a "show of force". We were lined up alongside the three ships, carrying clubs which were steel-tipped entrenching tool handles. We bore no firearms. There was not a Jew in sight but an officer addressed the three ships with a loud-hailer suggesting, I suppose, that they pay heed to our fearsome display and come out peaceably, into Germany. The Jews did not look and they did not hear. They were silent and they would not disembark.

So the action began. The tough paratroopers from Palestine who came with the Jews, and squads of our soldiers coming aboard, persuaded the more biddable up on deck and down the gangway of the first ship. And there they were.

My job was to deploy some soldiers to ensure that these people formed an orderly queue and boarded the waiting trains. The orderly queue quickly collapsed under the weight of numbers; and I still remember the worried face of one young soldier who was supposed to control the queue but who was engulfed by the swelling crowd.

What we had expected to see I do not know. We were warned that these Jews had a way of sneaking up behind you and cutting you with razor blades, and that the children would come up and stamp on your feet and, when you looked down, spit in your face. What we saw were poor bewildered people clutching a few belongings moving towards the trains. There were old people, mothers and babies, and children. I can see now the first troop of children without parents, shepherded by a single anxious and careworn man who looked overwhelmed by his responsibility for all those little ones. Over a distance of fifty years I love and admire that man.

The Jews began to climb into the first train. The coaches were ordinary enough but the windows, apart from the sliding panels at the top, were covered by metal grilles. They were meant to protect the Jews from attack as the trains took them off to special camps. Their effect, however, was to make the coaches look like cages. They were demeaning. They gave an extra turn to a familiar vicious spiral: if you degrade people you lose respect for them; and that gives you a licence to

degrade them still more. I had experienced this effect before in the treatment of so-called "Displaced Persons", some German civilians, and all kinds of prisoners when I was on duty in a rotten gaol. However, as it turned out, something about these Jews broke into the usual downward spiral and checked it, and they were not to be demeaned by what was done to them; though I think we were.

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The Jews started to fight back. Young men and women, some with blood streaming from head wounds, were being dragged or carried down the gangway and along to army lorries for dispatch elsewhere. I think some of the militants were identified by the paratroopers.

The struggles of one young woman suggested that she might have some deeper injury. She writhed in the grip of her captors and her bare rounded thighs were exposed, scissoring in an abandon of frustration or pain. I felt shame for her indignity, spiced with just a trace of sexual arousal. It was rumoured later that a young woman had thrown herself from the deck, or the gangway, on to the quay. Perhaps this was she.

Women from the German Red Cross were offering food and drink to the people on the quay. This was generous, considering that there were German children living near to starvation in the ruins of the city. Of course, the Jews could not possibly accept this refreshment. They had survived the worst pogrom in history; they had done all they could to get away from the place where people kept wanting to kill them; they had travelled across Europe; they had endured the privations of the ship "Exodus" which had brought them into sight of the Promised land; and now they had been brought back here, to the land of their oppressors, who met them with a red cross and an offering of food and drink. They could not accept it, and small packets of cream cheese sailed over the heads of the crowd like missiles.

Passions intensified. Anger, vituperation, hate, fed on themselves and grew. On the ships, on the quay, on the way to the trains the outrage of the victims was expressed in an increasing volume of shouts and chants. We and our uniforms were the only targets visible. "Nazis! Nazis! Nazis!". There is a graphic expression in the Hebrew Bible: "... they shoot out their lips"; and I saw what it meant.

There was a raised enclosure on the quay, close to the disembarking migrants, filled with the world's press and its busy typewriters. I daresay this juxtaposition of journalists and Jews heightened the emotional display, because both parties

needed a good story. And why not? But I remember permitting myself a certain moral censoriousness when a tall young woman with long black hair stood up in the press enclosure and called and gestured to the Jews on the gangway to resist, presumably so that she could get a good picture. It was all very well for her, she was not going to be whacked on the head.

So the day went on, the ships being emptied, the trains being filled, the militants being removed.

Images and Impressions

Most of the events of that day are beyond my recall but there are a few images and impressions which have stayed with me in a way which suggests that they convey something more universal than a small and largely forgotten military operation.

For example, I remember a squad of military policemen who suddenly appeared double-marching in snappy parade ground formation alongside the railway track and heading in our direction. They appeared to come from nowhere and to be going nowhere, and to have no discernible purpose. They were wearing motor-cycling gear with gaiters and crash helmets and they trotted past a train, knees lifting, boots bashing, left-right-left-right, in perfect time and with the utmost seriousness. As they did so gobbets of spit from the carriage windows fell on them like snowflakes and they were pursued by a shrill chant of "Gestapo! Gestapo! Gestapo!".

It was one of those moments when a facade of imposing power teetered on the edge of farce. Even the epithet "Gestapo" had a sort of comic craziness. Comedy, the reverse face of tragedy, was not all that far away. Supposing we had all fallen into the anarchy of laughter and had not been able to stop, how could the operation have continued? But no one was laughing.

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Another image which, after half a century, has power to move me deeply, is of an old man I saw sitting on the ground, too exhausted or defiant to move. No one stopped for him. As I remember it, he had no possessions other than what he held in his hand - a pair of sunglasses. These, I supposed, he had managed to acquire and to carry all the way across the sea; and all the way back here to Germany. He had come to the end of the road and he could go no farther. His hope was lost. Yet he held on to his sunglasses. He still kept in his hand this symbol, this sacrament, of a homeland in the sun, and the promise of Mount Zion. And this alone must suffice.

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Then there was the mother and her little girl. The child was three or four years old. Her mother, carrying her on her hip, stood in a railway carriage looking out above the metal grille. She waited for nothing, gazed at nothing. She was unmoving, expressionless, stunned, spent. A sergeant walked over to them. He was a hard regular soldier who had served in Palestine and wore a medal ribbon to prove it. He knew about Jews. He stood in front of these two, his harsh and bitter face close to their's; and he was staring at the little girl. She must have been frightened but neither she nor her mother turned away. I felt uneasy: should I intervene? Then the sergeant, without taking his eyes off the child, slowly slid his hand down inside his shirt (what was he going to do?) and drew out - an apple.

He offered the apple to the little girl. Her face was a study of conflicting emotions. She must have been hungry and thirsty and longing for the apple; but she also knew that we were her enemies and that she must not take any food from us. She turned to her mother and transferred the dilemma to her. Her mother made no response for a while. I imagine that within her there was a struggle between her daughter's need and her aversion to us, and she was trying to resolve it. The daughter watched her. Then the mother nodded. The daughter took the apple and smiled at the sergeant. The sergeant smiled back. The mother smiled at both. One small triangle of peace, while the fury and noise went on.

Nothing was changed by this brief meeting of eyes and smiles. Yet it stays clearly in my memory so I must have been affected by it. Does the mother remember it, does the daughter? And are they in Israel now?

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Do they remember the singing? It began somewhere, and then more joined in, and yet more. On the ships, down the gangway, at the dockside, moving towards the trains, above the noise of discord, the Jews were singing. I did not understand the words, but it seemed to me that this song was a challenge: we could do what we liked but we could not finally stop them. It was a song of migrants whose progress was like those epic migrations which occur in the natural order, when creatures move across the world driven by a magnetic force which can be resisted but not denied. The Jews were going to Israel whatever we did. Year after year at Passover it had been said: "Next year, Jerusalem". This year, in Hamburg docks, Exodus was now.

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I noticed some steel helmeted soldiers lift a struggling man by his arms and legs and carry him away. They were old

campaigners and they laughed with excitement. Two years after the War it seemed they were glad to be in action again, even though the man was unarmed and had been their enemy's enemy; and he would be undefeated because they would not stop him going where he chose.

Somehow, someday he and the others would get to Israel: where else could they go? The old man held on to his sunglasses, and the young men and women sang their song. "Pessimism" said Golda Meir, "is a luxury that a Jew can never allow himself."

Afterwards

I have no recollection of how the day ended except that the Jews all went away in the trains to what were vaguely called "camps". We went back to barracks in our lorries and carried on occupying Germany. The paratroopers sailed away.

Soon after the action ended we heard that after one of the trains had left Hamburg some Jews managed to prise open one of the metal grilles that covered the windows. It so happened that as they did so they passed a train going in the opposite direction. This train was overcrowded and some Germans were clinging on outside. Two of them were swept off by the grille and were killed.

Two or three days later we received newspapers from home. We were front page news and some of us appeared in photographs. There was also news of how the international press reported the story. "BRUTAL BRITISH BATTER JEWS OFF SHIPS" was a sample from America; and I read somewhere that a wave of horror swept across the world in response to what we had done.

It was not long before Great Britain handed over the Mandate to the United Nations and in 1948 the State of Israel came into being. At last there was place where Jews were uniquivocally responsible for their own successes and failures. If the State of Israel did well it was because Jews did well. If the State of Israel used its power wrongly, as other states do, then Jews were to blame and their friends would not excuse them. World Jewry, Zionist or not, could know that there was a place where Jews had statehood like other people. Perhaps, because the State of Israel exists, the majority of Jews, who do not live there, are paradoxically able to feel even more identified with their own home countries than they did before.

Our Battalion contributed one day to this piece of history. Ours was a minor military operation, largely forgotten but still important to me; and as the years have passed I have picked up occasional scraps of knowledge about it which have revived and supplemented my memory of what happened.

A decade later, for example, as an Anglican parish priest, I visited a family where there was a baby to be baptised. The conversation turned to past experiences and the father told me that he was a Military Policeman at Hamburg docks when the Exodus Jews came, and that while I was pacing the quay he was out there in the dark tossing hand grenades into the river. It was quite true that this was to deter neo-Nazis with limpet mines. He also confirmed a rumour we had heard that one of his colleagues had fallen off the boat and was found drowned in the Elbe, floating to attention with his red cap still on his head.

By that time the story had been becoming in my mind a sort of "traveller's tale" of diminishing reality. A parish visit jolted it back into hard history. It really happened.

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About thirty years after it happened I was confronted by a Council officer outside a squat. A group of us had supported a homeless family who had moved into an old Council-owned house, due at some time for demolition. The officer spoke forcefully to me and we were both a little angry. She said, if I remember rightly, that while she had every sympathy with these unfortunate people, they had in fact been offered accommodation elsewhere and that they were trying to jump the queue.

If these were her words they were to resonate strangely with a rekindled memory later in the day. The family were in possession and (first things first) had connected the television and made tea. I was slumped in a chair, mug in hand, watching the television. The programme was about the illegal emigrant ship "Exodus". There were old newsreel shots of "Exodus"; of the naval interception; and then, inevitably, of the quayside at Hamburg, soldiers from the battalion, and the unfortunate people. The programme claimed that there was no offer of accommodation in Cyprus, and that it was the intention from the beginning to send the Jews to Germany. If this was the truth then what the Staff Officer told us was not. (The next day council workmen broke into the house with sledgehammers and the family were evicted).

The programme's contention is given some credibilty by Harold Wilson, who was in the Attlee government in 1947. In his book "The Making of a Prime Minister" he says that Ernest Bevin, then the Foreign Secretary, was anti-semitic and strongly opposed the setting up of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Wilson states that "the tragic history of the illegal emigrant ships" was a factor in Bevin's decision to hand over the Palestinian mandate to the UN when he did. Pressure on him came especially from the United States and this he deeply resented, as Denis Healey records in his autobiography "The Time of My Life".

Lord Healey also tells how Bevin's Palestinian policy and the treatment of Jewish emigrants attracted hostility from Socialist colleagues at the International Socialist Conference in 1947. In the same year, he was with a Labour Party delegation in Italy, and found that there was a ship in the harbour at Spezia with a cargo of Jewish emigrants; and it was prevented from sailing for Palestine by the British Navy. He boarded the ship with Harold Laski who, "greatly moved", promised to get the British Goverment to lift the blockade - and succeeded! He actually got Ernest Bevin to change his mind.

I mention these things because when I was involved in the "Exodus" incident I knew little or nothing about its origins and consequences. It was not for many years that I began to understand something of its significance. My reaction at the time was a personal one - an unsoldierly pity which sat uneasily with a desire to do a soldierly job.

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Some forty years later I wondered whether I bore also a grain of personal responsibility. In another book by Harold Wilson I was astonished to find a reference to my Battalion. He says that in 1947 (when he was serving in the Attlee Government) a lawyer from the War Office told him about a lecture tour he had just completed in Rhine Army. He said that he had visited the Sherwood Foresters at Hamburg, shortly before the operation against the "Exodus" Jews. A sergeant from the Battalion asked to see him privately and told him that he was troubled by the operation and was thinking of refusing to take part. Presumably he wanted to know what punishment he would receive.

I remember that lawyer and his lecture on Military Law and I probably knew the sergeant; but I knew of no disobedience and there was no court martial. My guess is that the sergeant was placed on other duties to avoid a scandal. For forty years I had assumed that I was alone in my unease; but here was someone who not only felt unhappy at what he would be commanded to do but who also considered refusing to do it. Such disobedience never occurred to me. It was not an option that presented itself. Even if it had done I would probably have obeyed my orders, not only for fear of punishment, but also, and perhaps more, because I feared the scorn of the others who, as I supposed, had no such qualms.

Because of this experience I can understand how it is that a soldier can, without misgiving, take the first step down a path which, as step follows step, will lead him to a War Crimes Court. Later that year I commanded a firing squad which executed a German officer for doing just that.

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Recently, I again saw on television an old newsreel about the "Exodus" Jews at Hamburg docks. I had not seen it before but with a disturbing sense of inevitability, almost prescience, I watched while the camera moved to the railway sidings and the trains. And there, in the foreground, stood an officer in battledress with only his head outside the frame. It is possible that I was looking at myself, fifty years ago.

It is a silly conceit, but suppose I could cross the half century and place my old head on those young shoulders: what would I, aged 20 years, have felt? what would I have done? I would have been carrying in my head then what I carry now. The story of the death camps would have been more credible, the action we were taking more outrageous, the shame of centuries of anti-semitism more keenly felt. And I would see myself as the newsreel made me see myself: as on the side of the oppressors. I would have had much to come to terms with, and I still have.

Coming to Terms

I am still the person I was then, and whatever share of responsibility I bore then, I bear now. Time does not remove it. It would be ludicrous to compare it to the responsibility of those who engineered the holocaust. It would grossly belittle the sufferings both of the millions who perished, and of those who survived. Yet there is still something for the likes of me to come to terms with.

There are, for example, the children. In his book "Fragments" Binjamin Wilkomirski recounts his fragmented memories of his life as a small child in the Majdanek death camp, and as an orphan in Switzerland after the War. His terrors continued long after he left the camp and to see uniforms and to hear the word "transport" still filled him with a fear which kindly strangers could not understand. And while he was facing these fears in Switzerland, there in Hamburg orphaned children were filing past "uniforms" and boarding "transports". I was quite unaware of how frightened these apparently docile children might have been.

I wore that uniform because at seventeen I had joined the army so that I might take the side of the good against the bad. Now these Jewish children placed me, firmly and ingloriously, on the wrong side.

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I repeat, the events of that day bear no comparison with the horrors that preceded it, but I do believe that they grow from the same root. That root is the endemic anti-semitism which

has bedevilled Europe for centuries. It has been widespread and largely unconscious, and the more insidious for that.

When I was a boy at a Grammar School my best and much-admired friend was a Jew but that did not mean I was free of the ancestral anti-semitic contagion. I once had an altercation with another Jewish boy and I made a flippant remark about Jewish complicity which on the face of it was harmless; but I can now see that it arose from an atavistic attitude which had prompted persecution after persecution in the past. The boy recognised this instantly, but I might have remained unaware of it had he not done me the service of hitting me on the ear. I still want to apologise to him and wish I had at the time. Perhaps he should have hit me harder!

It is necessary to come to terms with this truth about ourselves. And it is hard to face the thought that where we European Gentiles have finally been purged of our anti-semitism it is not due to any suffering on our part. It is due to the unspeakable sufferings of our victims. We Christians ought to understand this more than most because we place images of a dead Jew on a cross all over the place, including round our necks, and we are fond of quoting the songs of Isaiah about a Suffering Servant who died for the sins of many.

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As a priest of the Established Church, it has taken me a long time to accept the part played by the Christian Church in demonising and victimising the Jews. By contempt, calumny and crusade; by forcible conversion, murder and Inquisition; and by washing the Jewishness out of Jesus, the Church legitimised the scapegoating of the People to whom it owed its existence.

An example of this is the shrine of Little St Hugh in Lincoln Cathedral. Hugh was a boy aged nine who was said to have been crucified by the Jews of Lincoln in 1255, probably because his body was found down a well near Jews Court. As a result the chief rabbi was dragged through the streets tied to a horse's tail and was then hanged on a hill together with eighteen other Jews. The child was given a martyr's grave and shrine, thus giving Christian credibility to the story.

I regularly walked past that shrine as a theological student at Lincoln and thought how terrible it was, but I do not think I ever accepted the shame of it for myself. I was ready to take to myself all the advantages of a national church, with the buildings and privileges and holy orders and history that went with it; but I did not want the shame that went with it as well, the shame of a Church which through centuries has allowed its religion to give legitimacy to the passions of the lynch mob.

Now, fifty years after seeing one small fruit of that sowing, I need to accept a share of the shame; the shame that a Roman Catholic bishop must have felt, when Hitler told him that in persecuting the Jews he was simply continuing what the Church had done for sixteen centuries.

Am Israel Chai

This shame, together with a persistent desire to find someone to whom I can say I am sorry, is a necessary experience but it can be a form of self-indulgence which goes nowhere. In any case, I am sure the people of Israel can do without miserable Christians hanging about them asking to be let off.

What I believe we should be seeking, through penitence, is a celebration of joy which swallows up the shame and the pain; and which Christian and Jew can share together. Happily, from Christianity's beginning, there have been Christians who have turned to the Jews with respect and appreciation and the Church has found renewal and new life as a consequence.

It seems to me that the Church now needs Judaism more than ever. I recently visited the synagogue in a nearby town. I was received with courtesy and shown the building where Jews had gathered and kept the faith for about 180 years. It was a small and humble place. There was beauty in it but it was hidden in the scrolls of the Torah. There was dignity but it was derived from those who pray there. I felt a need to belong there as I do to the grander buildings where I minister. I longed to be one of those Gentiles who in Zechariah's prophecy take a Jew by the sleeve and say, "We want to go with you, since we have learnt that God is with you." And I pray for an Israel which will include both Jew and Christian in some way which I do not yet comprehend.

The Orthodox Jewish philosopher Emil Fackenheim, writing of Christian repentance over black slavery, goes on to say: "Will the time come when all Christians will turn against their other, far older sin of antisemitism - when, dancing in Jerusalem with Jews, they will chant in astonishment, gratitude and joy: 'Am Israel chai - The people of Israel lives.'"

I have this dreamy picture of Mount Zion, in this world and yet not of this world; and there is a great party and music and dancing because Israel is complete. And the old man will be wearing his sunglasses, and the little girl will give a poor soldier an apple, and the children will not be afraid, and I shall be able to join in the song the Jews sang in Hamburg fifty years ago.

Sources

My unreliable memory.

Harold Wilson: "The Making of a Prime Minister"

Denis Healey: "The Time of my Life"

Binjamin Wilkomirski: "Fragments" (Picador 1996)

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P.C.A.