

STAY IN YOUR OWN BACKYARD!

Life Is Difficult In Rosbruck cum Nassweiler

SINCE the declaration of war, most of us have unearthed our old geography books. If these were not forthcoming, young Tommy's or young Billy's school-bag has been ruthlessly plundered. The next step will be the march of coloured flags, but for the moment we are content to peer over the map of Europe, tracing each day the slow but steady advance into the Saar.

On the printed page the European map resembles a suburban lot of gaily coloured backyards. That innocent-looking clothes line is in reality a frontier. Harmless, peaceful-seeming plots that translated into real life are powder magazines. Some of them recently have gone off, with an accompanying flutter in the neighbouring settlements.

As our main interest in the Western Front centres round the Saar and the Allied advance over the frontier into German territory, the little frontier town of Rosbruck cum Nassweiler is a backyard of unique interest; since its family clothes line has the distinction of establishing a national divide.

Cut It In Two

The story goes back to the days following the Saar plebiscite, when an international border commission drew a large black line down the main street of the town—designating one side German and the other French. The two national flags fluttered either side of the boundary, and it was considered an act of treason on the part of the French to refer to the town as Nassweiler, while the German side was correspondingly punished if the name of Rosbruck was used.

Thus two people of two different nations lived across the streets from each other, and the family clothes line that divided them was stronger than any steel girder, for it was composed of racial differences, racial prejudices, widely separated social and economic customs—even a separate language.

The main street was actually made of two different compositions—the German side of

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reddish soil set against the dull hard surface of the French road.

A Vein of Tragedy

The picture would be amusing but for that vein of tragedy beneath.

Imagine a couple of French gendarmes exchanging a friendly salute, while on the

malinity, these occasions became increasingly rare.

Forbidden Games

School children must have gazed wistfully across that forbidden line; their small souls tempted by some jolly game in progress on the other side. But they knew too well, without understanding, the strength and indomitability of that dividing frontier. If one of their toys rolled across it, they must wait in patience till a patrol guard was interested sufficiently to return it to them.

Once German workmen would step across to a French café for a revive at the end of their day's work, but the practice was later discontinued, as it was then forbidden to take money out of the country!

The economic situation was an extraordinary one. Business life could not flourish with the actual market divided in two. Anyone found buying any commodity from the opposite side of the street would be liable to a heavy fine.

Scarcity and Plenty

On the French side food was cheap and plentiful—on the German side scarce and conserved. The journalist, Edward Hunter, who describes this frontier town, remarked that the scarcity of many basic foodstuffs was more evident in Nassweiler than anywhere else in Germany.

Both sides stuck stubbornly to their town's name, and it was a common sight to see a delivery van marked Rosbruck driving down the French side of the street, while a similar one marked Nassweiler kept pace with it on the other.

Formerly everyone spoke a Teutonic dialect, but now the German of Berlin and the French of Paris shared equal honours.

School children were taught not only a different language, but different histories of the region itself. Individualism and democracy were praised to them on one side and ridiculed on the other.

And After The War?

I have nearly developed a squint trying to find Rosbruck cum Nassweiler on my young brother's school map. I can't seem to pick it out, but even if this particular backyard is not considered important enough to mark on the country's map, it nevertheless has a very real existence.

What will have happened to this strange community in the present international crisis?

Maybe, at the completion of the present war, when the cartographers have completed their revised set of maps, Rosbruck cum Nassweiler will find itself without the embarrassment of such a clumsy clothes line.

"Here, Tommy, take your geography book!"



"... A couple of French gendarmes exchange a friendly greeting: on the other side a patrol of Brown-Shirt guards"

other side a patrol of Brown-Shirt guards stand stiffly to attention.

But human relationship goes deeper than any national difference. Who is to say that a French heart did not beat quicker because the sun shone brighter on a fraulein's fair tresses across the way? Many a German frau or a friendly French housewife must have longed in their feminine hearts to exchange a bit of pleasant gossip. But such camaraderie was not for them. It was a case of "Stay in your own backyard!" Occasionally the rule was relaxed, but only under police supervision. If Frau B— wished to dine with Madame X—, passports and visas had to be presented as in the case of aliens entering a foreign country, and in the face of such for-