

REFUGEE SHIP

By Alison Grant

When I got back everyone I knew seemed pretty surprised to see me again so soon.

"But look here—I say—didn't you go to England?"

"Been and come."

"Well! Some people have all the luck."

"Luck? Yes—you're right, I suppose. And New Zealanders have most of it."

"But England—I thought you loved England?"

"I do—terribly. That's why—partly—we just couldn't stay. There's something happened to it in the three years we've been away. It isn't just that there's going to be war. . . ."

"What the deuce are you talking about! Which way did you come any way—Suez?"

"Yes. Refugee ship."

"Oh! Pretty rotten."

ROTTEN? Yes, I suppose it was rotten. Tragic. And uncomfortable. But Heavens! I wouldn't have missed that trip out for anything!

First—there were 800 of us crammed more or less over the screw—Tourist B—XYZ. Eleven-twelfths of the boat was Luxury Liner—double the price—with 70 odd passengers. We were in the twelfth twelfth—and we thrived on it. We were the Refugees.

There were families from Austria, Poland, Czecho-Slovakia, Rumania, Hungary, Italy, Sweden, Latvia, France. And us—from England. Funny, that seemed. Europe was one place—from the Russian boundaries to the Western Coast of Ireland—one place in fear, uncertainty, unrest.

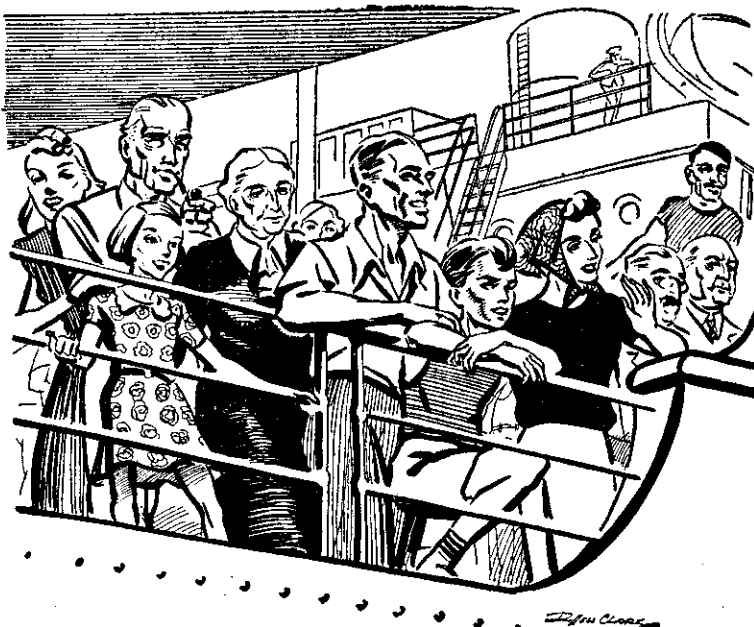
Of course, in some parts it was worse than others. For instance, in Vienna they were flinging people out of their homes. In London they were only flinging bags of sand against the buildings.

Mostly Jews

They were mostly Jews, of course, on the boat—Jews who had lost everything. But a good many of them—mostly the Poles—had never had anything. They kept together, huddled, silent except for sudden purely private quarrels. Their children were always near them. A few Italians of the swart thick sort—taciturn, unfriendly. The Germans were mostly women married to Jewish husbands—likeable, sensible, staunch but a bit puzzled. The Czechs were heavy, simple, honest—the women motherly with gay child's minds. The Rumanians, serious, romantic, with something of the fatal melancholy of the Russian.

But from Vienna came the Viennese. How they loved that place! How their eyes warmed in retrospect, and brimmed suddenly, not for personal tragedy, but for the tragedy of their Vienna. This new life in this new land to which they journeyed demanded of them that they live again. But they had already lived and died—in Vienna.

Yet—how alive their women were—quick, courteous, lithe, lovely—brilliant yet human—a magic brew. And their men who found no embarrassment in being themselves—eager and individual. After English restraint and reticence, how splendid—like coming out of a London Underground into the vital



Spring air. Only after ports, when letters had come—or not come—did they retreat to cabins to emerge some three days later with the shadow not quite gone from their eyes.

New Life and Hope

How grateful they were for this foothold that Australia was offering—sun and South, new life, new hope. With feverish energy they already built and planned. One woman whose son had gone before her now travelled with her husband, sick with excitement at the prospect of re-union.

"This passport" she said, "This passport—it is my passport to Paradise!"

I knew their story. Heaven knows, it was earned.

Another, warned by an Australian that she would not like the careless litter of the landscape, cried with swimming eyes:

"Paper! Paper in the streets! How can such things matter!"

After the Equator was passed—almost within the hour of passing—a strange change came over everyone—a lightening of the spirit, as though the dead weight of fear had slipped from them at last. "Now—we are in the South of the World—we are safe," and they began to watch eagerly for the Southern Cross.

And how they studied! Day by day and in the evenings—always with dictionaries—this difficult

English was attacked. Word by word, phrase by phrase, it was conquered. How grateful each was for a half-hour—a ten minutes even—of real tuition. How we sweated and swatted! "That that that that man used was correct!" "I never thought you knew I knew you knew!" I still feel that the Australian Government is in my debt. Men and women who climbed gangways with an "O.K." as their sole achievement went off at Sydney as useful citizens with a wide and workable vocabulary.

The Children Learnt Quickly

But the children were, by far the quickest. They already spoke two languages—their own and German—and often a third. They soon had an adequate English. One day we found them in possession of the writing-room. My small son of seven was holding up endless inky drawings he had made for them while they repeated the words carefully after him.

"Window."

"Window."

"Table."

"Table."

Chairs and floor were littered with the ship's writing paper on which were the crude outlines. They did not notice us watching from the door. They were absorbed and deadly serious.

In return, for many days, a small delicious "Hanna" took my boy everywhere by the hand and pointed.

"Wasser."

"Wasser."

"Himmel."

"Himmel."

And then, "Was ist das?"

Here were people one knew and liked—instantly and without argument. People with all the conventional barriers down—simple and natural—extraordinarily related to one's inner self—mere human beings as most of us are after all.

Sadness of Parting

From the debris of their lives they had stooped and picked out the things of real value—honesty, courage, and simple happiness—and come away. All the rest—social snobbery, greed, personal ambition—they had seen for what it was, and left lying. There was a real sadness abroad that last week. When Sydney came they hung about till the last minute—reluctant to leave a ship that had been sanctuary—peace and health and hope to them. We remained in port three days. And back they came and back—for yet another good-bye to all.

"Aufwiedersehn."

"Aufwiedersehn."

One tiny "Lisa," returning hot from Sydney's streets expressed it all. "O Mummy—ain't it good to be home again." She did not know it was for an hour only.

"What was your boat like?"

"Not the best."

"Food any good?"

"No. Bad."

"Decent accommodation?"

"The worst I've struck yet."

"Hm'n—a rotten trip."