My Country Right or Wrong

(Written for "The Listener" by M.S.)

IN this war many racial groups are fighting together. But the old racial prejudices are hard to dislodge.

Take Aunt Ada, for instance. She is not even so much a New Zealander as a South Islander. "Give me the good old south," she says, "The kettle's always on the hob. They respect the Sabbath, too. They pay their way. Why, up here, people have the clothes worn off their backs before they're paid for."

Unlike most people who just accept the country of their birth, Aunt Ada gets so vociferous about it as to be aggressive. She slaps her chest, sticks her neck out and goes for it. "What's wrong with little old New Zealand, God's Own Country, that's what it is. I'm proud to be a New Zealander. Ding-dong New Zealander, that's me."

If she had been born in Australia, she'd have been a "dinkum Aussie," if in England a True-blue Britisher, if in Ireland she would assuredly have kissed the blarney stone. If Germany had been her Fatherland, she would have been heiling Hitler with the others. "Homies" are only tolerated because her mother was one. Even the industrious Chinese come under her ban. "I wouldn't be seen buying vegetables in those chow shops."

Not even will she accept the Maoris. "A dirty thriftless lot. This war is making them too cheeky. Give them something decent (we haven't tried it yet, I mildly interpose) and they'll be in the gutter to-morrow."

The sight of an American makes her snort. "This place isn't decent any longer. The trouble these Yanks bring. . . ."

"But surely," I say, "You'd rather have the Yanks than the Japs."

"I'm not saying I wouldn't. But still. . . ."

And as for those Jews coming here and buying everything while our brave boys are fighting! "Those slinky refugees are up to no good. You can't trust a foreigner. Let them go back where they came from. We don't want them here."

"Neither did the Maoris want us when we grabbed up everything."

"What nonsense," she calls out, "They couldn't govern themselves. They need a white man over them. Look at what we've given them. You're talking rubbish."

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NOW Evie is an entirely different proposition. If Aunt Ada gets mad at foreigners, Evie goes quite crazy over them. I don't know which is worse.

If the pacifists love all people, it is from a sense of ethics. With Evie her love of foreigners is sheer romanticism. Her internationalism started early. Before she was 10 she met a broken-down old Polish pedlar, Moritz Mannheim, and he was such an amazing old man with whiskers and fiery eyes and spluttering speech that Evie spent many happy hours with him, and he gave her a nice potato-masher.

Then she followed the German bands and loved to talk with those quiet music-making Germans. They taught her to say *Bitte* and *Auf wiedersehen.* When the band went away, she soon found a German cobbler, and while he mended shoes in his dusty old shop, Evie sat on a box. They both chatted gaily, and he gave her a fusty old German song book with a jolly song in it called *Im Wald und auf der Heiden,* and she sang it so much that her mother protested: "Stop singing that gibberish."

Her greatest school friend was the half-Austrian, half-Jewish daughter of a Rabbi. A little later, Evie joined her first correspondence club, and wrote her first ecstatic letters to Sireen Banaji, Nepeau Sea Road, Bombay. Then she wrote to Boske Hausner, Ygal, Somogy, Hungary (or Ungarn, as Evie so lovingly called it).

Then there was Marie McGhee, who had a musical post in Vienna. She was half-Irish and Scottish on one side and half-French and German on the other, and Evie was green with envy.

From Helsingfors (as it was then) came letters from a boy, and the polite young man from Budapest, Ernst Simon, began his letter thus: "Highly respected Miss:" but when Evie got his letter translated it was mostly requests for rare stamps.

To complicate matters, Evie's grandfather was Highland, and had the Gaelic and she would run hotfoot after the bagpipes, and her heart leapt when she saw a swinging kilt.

She once arrived at a small cafe in Nelson with some friends. A tall, raw-boned, square-jawed young man served her, he looked like a Norwegian, and sure enough when he spoke his voice was foreign.

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