

**E**VERY now and then something happens to thrust the mind back from the simple scene of New Zealand to-day, to that continent of fear and suspicion, the Europe which feared that Hitler might make war. This particular batch of memories of those days was aroused by a remark heard the other day in the saloon on the Nelson boat. Inevitably such memories are hard to organise into a respectably connected narrative, but chaotic as they are, they may help a little towards a clearer picture of present events.

On the Nelson boat we were living very much in the present, when suddenly amidst the crowd a voice was heard loudly proclaiming that "the boats ought all to be one class, like in Russia!" The mind was concentrated on tea, but its curious file-index system was getting to work all the same, routing out facts about Russian ships and other things.

Gradually there came memories of a student party aboard the twin-turbine ship Sibir. She was bound from London to Leningrad, with a cargo of machine-tools, tourists, and diplomats, all passing through the be-swastika'd Kiel Canal under the potent protection of the Hammer and Sickle. It was curious to be on Soviet territory in the midst of Nazi territory, and to have a Russian seaman pointing at one's camera, and saying "Shoot that Fascist!" every time any theatrical-looking Brownshirt came within rifleshoot on the bank. The emblems of Worker and Peasant did not pass unnoticed through that tidy grass-and-stonework territory either. Occasionally some individual on the bank would look towards our boat and pointedly draw his fingers across his throat. Occasionally, too, a man working on the bank alone, and well concealed from all other Germans, would look towards the Soviet ship and raise his right fist to his shoulder in the Communist salute.

### Submarines in Five Days!

It was the summer of 1935, and soon after emerging from the last lock into Kiel Bay and the Baltic, we were surprised enough when we sighted three medium-sized German U-boats sharing that narrow stretch of sea with us. Immediately we all wanted to ask highly political questions and, as we chanced to have a former First Lord of the Admiralty on board, an enterprising member of the party went to seek his expert information. "Excuse me, Mr. Alexander," our man said, "but I believe you were First Lord of the Admiralty in the Labour Government?"

"I was, for my sins," said Mr. Alexander.

"Well, then, could you tell us anything about those submarines?"

Mr. Alexander indicated that he wouldn't know anything about that.

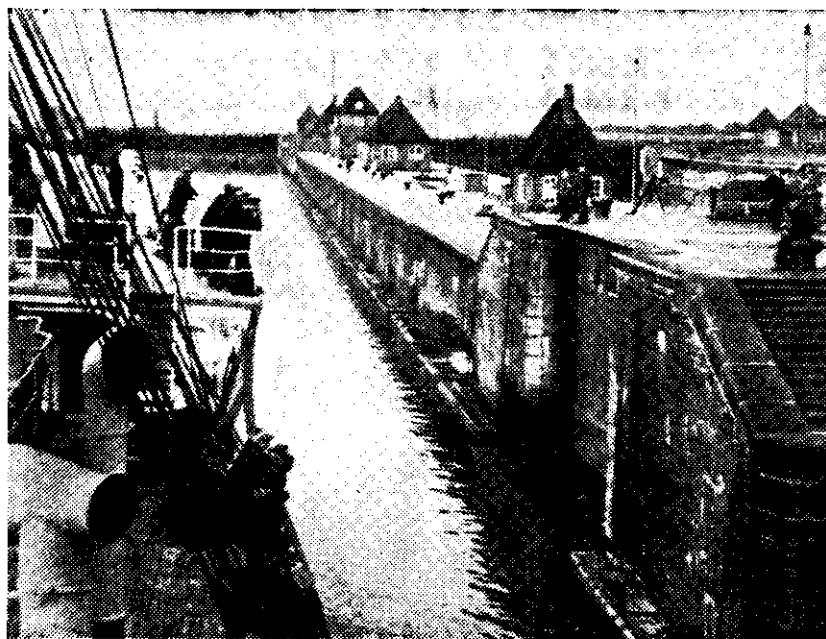
"It's only about five days, isn't it, since the new treaty permitted Germany to start submarines?"

"Yes," said the past and future First Lord of the Silent Service. It had been only a couple of days before we sailed from the Pool of London that the Appeasement Policy towards the Axis had been handsomely inaugurated by the signing of the bilateral Anglo-German Naval Agreement. From the Russian deck in Kiel Bay, Mr. Alexander and the rest of us had a clear view of what agreements with Nazi Germany were

# "ALL ONE CLASS LIKE IN RUSSIA"

## To Leningrad Through The Kiel Canal

(Written for "The Listener" by JAMES HARRIS)



A view of the Kiel Canal, from the deck of the Russian ship Sibir.

worth, that is, unless they could really plan, build, and commission U-boats within the space of five days!

### The Baltic is Not So Small

On the usual sort of atlas, the Baltic looks a small sea, so it was surprising to us to spend two days without any sight of land except for the low green island of Gotland, a part of Sweden, lying to westwards for most of a morning, while ship after ship passed us, southward bound with great deck cargoes of timber. Later that day there was dead calm, and the prow of the Leningrad-built Sibir seemed to cut into an endless sheet of green glass. Astern, the wake was regular and dead straight, and all around there was nothing but the completely smooth green surface; and no sign of land until a launch crossed ahead of us, taking passengers from Esthonia to Finland. Later, Kronstadt with its strange warships was to loom up ahead, unannounced by previous coast, and then a fleet of sails, the Leningrad Yacht Club, and finally the endless timber-covered wharves of what was then about the busiest port in the world.

Other memories of that voyage are of individuals on board. There were the tourists, of course, going for a brief trip to get a preview of heaven, or with the grim purpose of knowing the worst about hell, according to their ideologies. Amongst them were some with definite purposes. In particular there was a Russian-American returning to his native land expressly to tell the Soviets how to run a cafeteria. That seemed funny at the time, and we used to argue instead of listening to his instruction. The Soviets had more sense, and about a year later Moscow City was claiming

*\*Ideology: the body of prejudice a man has about him when he approaches any practical problem.*

to have a fine cafeteria with more choices of this and that than anywhere else in the world. Nevertheless, a cafeteria monomaniac makes a difficult shipmate. If only we had listened on the occasion when he cornered us and talked on his only topic, we might now be big-shots on Queen Street or Lambton Quay. But by heedless youth, the man who was giving away priceless information for nothing was just regarded as the ship's bore.

### A Russian View of London

The crew, which belonged to a different world from ours, we found in those days more interesting than the crazy folk of our own world, and our party rather monopolised the scarce spare time of those of them who spoke English and could interpret for us. We asked one young sailor about his impressions of London. His reply was only four words of Russian, which was a disappointment until it was translated. When we got it into English, though, it proved to be what was once known as a "mouthful." In English it was still four words: "Nice people. Filthy city." When we had seen the clean red roofs of Moscow, we appreciated his remark more, and the smoke of London was not so easily accepted as a normal part of nature.

The first impressions of Leningrad, apart from masses of timber, were of masses of people, and of fine buildings which were in sore need of painting. Our first evening we spent walking about the streets and over the bridges, looking at the buildings and at about a million other people who were also strolling in the endless twilight. We listened to the singing of Red Army detachments marching back to barracks, and wondered when it would get dark. By and by a small boy who heard us talking

came up and said very precisely: "I speak two words of English." We said in Russian that we didn't speak Russian, and after that the conversation bogged down, much to everyone's regret. Just about then we discovered it was 3.0 a.m. There were still plenty of people about, and it still wasn't dark. We remembered about the White Nights of St. Petersburg, and when we got back to the hotel at 4.0 a.m. people were still dancing. Up there near the Arctic Circle it never really does get dark in summer, and sleeping seems to be considered a waste of time.

### Leningrad Was on the Alert

In Leningrad we collected ideas of serious matters, also. When we inquired why they didn't bother to paint their buildings, we were given to understand that air-raids by Germans, operating most probably from Finland, would soon be making them need a lot more repairs than a mere coat of paint. When we saw the decontamination outfits in blocks of flats, and saw a practice alarm in progress, with the millions disappearing from the broad streets within about two minutes of the siren sounding, we understood that this fear of a German attack through Finland was something they took seriously. The later Russian attack on Finland didn't come as a surprise. When tough and self-confident people like the three million citizens of Leningrad fear something, it is not long before they are taking steps to get it eliminated. What New Zealand calls the pioneer spirit was much in evidence in Russia.

### Some Russian Characters

Of all the Russian memories though, it is of the ship and her people that the pictures remain most vivid. There was the formidable Captain, who could do everything better than anyone else; could even beat the cook at ship's billiards, a curious game that was usually in progress all over the decks. I was to see him show his confidence in his ship by putting her about in her own length in the narrow waters of the Maas on nothing but the opposed twin screws, with not even a piece of string put out to the banks. There was the kindly doctor, and the pleasant Mongolian-looking steward, bringing glasses of clear tea, and after supper bringing round a bottle and small glasses, and saying "Wodka, wodka, wodka?" On the ship on the return voyage, too, was the only occasion on which a Soviet citizen or anyone else has found need to congratulate me on the successful practice of "occult art!"

On that voyage back towards London there were 77 seamen and officers, and nine passengers only, for we carried two extra crews, to be transhipped in Holland to vessels which had just been bought from the Dutch. Among this large complement there was a young Navigation Student who spoke English. He came from Central Asia, where his parents, he said, kept bees and were bothered by tigers. It would seem that the rest of the Confucius story about tigers also applied. "The Government was not bad there." For somehow, in that drastically inland home, my new friend had conceived the unlikely ambition of becoming a ship's officer; when I met him, the ambition was almost achieved.

### Not So Classless

For the benefit, at least, of the character on the Nelson boat, the classes on the Russian ship need remembering,

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