

THROUGH NEUTRAL EYES

How Sweden Sees The War

(Written for "The Listener" by DOROTHY STRACHAN)

THOSE people who listen each day to the news broadcasts from the BBC, some time ago heard the announcer read a report of the first open debate since 1939 in the Swedish Parliament. In this report of the government statement were the words: "In view of the changed international situation it should be definitely affirmed that Sweden intends to maintain a neutral policy, although as a result of such a policy the greater part of our trade with Germany has ceased. Sweden is deeply shaken at what has been inflicted on our western neighbours. The Swedish Government does not accept the German statement that what happens to our neighbours does not concern us. Persons who have defied the conscience of the civilised world, or who have behaved as traitors, and arrive here, will be returned to their own country."

In time of war very little is heard of neutral countries; and what they are doing, how war affects them, and how their people are living tends to slip into the background of our thoughts unless there is some special reason for its not doing so. And that is the case as far as I am concerned—the special reason being a friendship with a Swede, which has grown steadily ever since that day in July, 1932, when I received my first letter from him.

Between the years 1932 and 1939—from days of peace until that time when the storm clouds over Europe finally broke—our correspondence was regular and grew more and more interesting. Then came war, and silence for five years. In October of last year I received the first word I had had of him during that time—three long type-written pages on the finest of air-mail paper which travelled to me by air from Stockholm to Scotland, then by surface mail to New Zealand. And it was that letter which prompted the thought that others may find interesting a few glimpses of Europe and the world as seen through neutral eyes, and of life in Sweden.

"Emigrants" from Germany

Let us first of all go back to those last letters before war was declared. The people of Sweden were as aware as any others in Europe that trouble lay ahead and although then, as in 1914, their policy lay in neutrality, they watched the future with anxious eyes, as may be seen from this extract from a letter written in the university city of Uppsala in November, 1938. "During the last five months there have arrived here 30,000 emigrants from Germany, and they are 30,000 too many for our economic life."

At that time my correspondent was a lieutenant in the Swedish Army, with five years of study and service ahead of him.

Six months later (April, 1939) he wrote a very hurried note:

"I await the order of mobilisation every day. Europe is insane. Two days ago Mussolini took Albania—to-morrow it might be our turn! I envy New Zealand's position on the ball! Last week there was much anxiety in Sweden, for it was reported that a big German fleet

was cruising outside Gottland (our island in the Baltic). But they steamed away when our ships went out. Next time there might be a little quarrel!"

"All the country is in a feverish hurry to fortify her coasts and towns. This week a rich merchant in this town (Uppsala) gave four anti-aircraft guns to the town. I had to make a break in my studies at the chemical high school (he was, at the time, studying for a civil degree also, as he did not want his career to be a military one after his term of office was over) and am now travelling again all over the country to inspect and prove the gas protection. This is the third time Hitler has disturbed my plans!" (He gives a brief and forceful description of Hitler, but I think we had better regard it as unprintable!)

This letter finishes, "I hope this is not the last letter before the catastrophe." And his next one, begun on

than obscure! I have not seen any of my relatives for I don't know how long a time, and I don't know when I will. My fiancée has joined the Red Cross, as have my two sisters. My father has joined the army and my mother has joined our big dog Peter, and stayed at home, alone. The world is upside down."

After Five Years

And now we skip five years—years during which my thoughts were frequently directed towards Sweden and I wondered if some misfortune had befallen my friend. Had he, through his liking for Finland, joined the Finnish army as a volunteer and lost his life fighting in the north, or had some other fate befallen him in the course of his



A photograph taken early in 1941 of a Swedish Army parade, with the son of a member keeping pace

August 25, 1939, and finished on September 3, begins: "As a matter of fact, this is the last letter before the catastrophe." By this time all chance of his continuing his civil studies seemed to have vanished. (Though now, five years later, he has gained his doctorate in science) and he was fearful concerning the southern provinces of Sweden. His idea was that the only way for the British to reach Germany would be via the Danish islands and south Sweden, and he was sure that, to prevent such a happening, Germany would try to get there first. However, Sweden was well prepared, and her men were well trained—especially for war in their own particular type of country, and the people were grimly determined to keep that part of the world under their own rule.

He concludes this letter: "The people are very calm and the soldiers excellent. But they are all dreadfully angry at Hitler's brutality."

In his last letter before the five years' silence (during which time he wrote twice—letters which never reached New Zealand) one again gets a picture of the thoroughness with which the Swedish people prepared to defend their homeland if necessary.

"I have had a very busy time (he writes) and I have not slept in a real bed more than three times since the war broke out. My studies are forgotten and my economy is more

military work? Year after year passed, and no news came, until at last arrived this letter which I found so interesting that it is worth quoting at length.

"... A couple of times I tried to send you a line, but that was before we got the British air-line and I am afraid I wrote something about my willingness to have Adolf fried in oil, which might have been too much for the digestion of the German staff of censors.

"One good thing is that I am not in uniform this summer. But I am sure I shall have to take it on again soon. We have to keep up a most vigorous guard and as there are only six millions of us, the periods of civil life cannot be very long for the private person. I wonder how many times Adolf has felt sorry he did not take us at the same time as Norway and Denmark. Of course we would have fought then, too, but we could have no chance of getting help from outside. Besides, we had sent Finland too much war material for her winter war, 1939-40, so our own stores were almost empty. An attack from Germany in April, 1940, would have been a short affair. Now the scene is different. Our arsenals are filled and our equipment not very bad. I think the British are satisfied with our Bofors guns.

"The best of it is that every Swede from the poorest peasant up to the chief



Swedish troops exercise outside the ancient defences of a Baltic town

of the army knows what occupation is like. Had they come in 1940 they would have found many collaborators. Of course they try to get recruits now, too. There is, for instance, a paper here—*Dagsposten*, which is still winning German victories in Russia and France. The recruits are of two sorts. First: business people who are afraid that all their outstanding accounts in Germany will go overboard—persons who are more afraid of the Russians than of anything else in the world. Second: criminal elements who had no success in their lives. The first category are pro-Germans, but they will fight German aggression as bravely as any one of us. The second group are not Swedes any more. I know from my work in the army that there are not many of them, and they have no merry hours. The Swedish soldier is astonishingly up-to-date in his treatment of quislings.

"Yesterday we got the report of Finland's present crisis. Finland's situation is indeed a tragedy. In the winter war we did what we could. I am not quite sure that it is known abroad how we imperilled ourselves. Our government also played a leading part in the efforts to get peace in 1940. Finland's second war is something quite different. It was one of the greatest stupidities in history. Nevertheless it is easy to understand why they took the chance. We never did agree that it was wise. At every moment possible our government has tried to help them to peace. It is reported that these new efforts to make peace are supported by our Foreign Office. Finland stands very close to our hearts, there must be some chance for her to live a free life in the future.

Many Kinds of Refugee

"We know that there have been said many bitter words about our unwillingness to enter the war. But slowly the United Nations seem to realise our situation. Among our neighbours the Norwegians have had the greatest difficulty to understand. Many hard words have been said of our cowardice. Nevertheless I think we can help them better now than if we had gone to war. Sweden is full of refugees from almost every country in Europe. Norwegians and Danes are in the majority but there

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