

BY CANOE INTO HITLER'S REDOUBT

Written for "The Listener" by JAMES HARRIS

IN 1936 I went through the heart of Hitler's southern redoubt by canoe, travelling from Innsbruck to Passau down the Inn, which was then for some of its length the Southern frontier of Nazidom, and from Passau to Linz down the Danube. Though the political menace overshadowed interest in scenery, the arrival of our canoes in Kufstein was the most impressive moment in the trip, for as the racing current swept us through the bridges the majestic music of a great organ swelled out from the hillside, and continued while we went through the tricky operations of landing. Soon we were carrying our canoes over to the "Noah's Ark" inn, which was our last stopping-place before entering Hitler's Reich, and where we were to make our first contact with Nazi talk over the beer-mugs. Increasingly, the man from Braunau further down river, and the things he stood for, came to dominate the countryside.

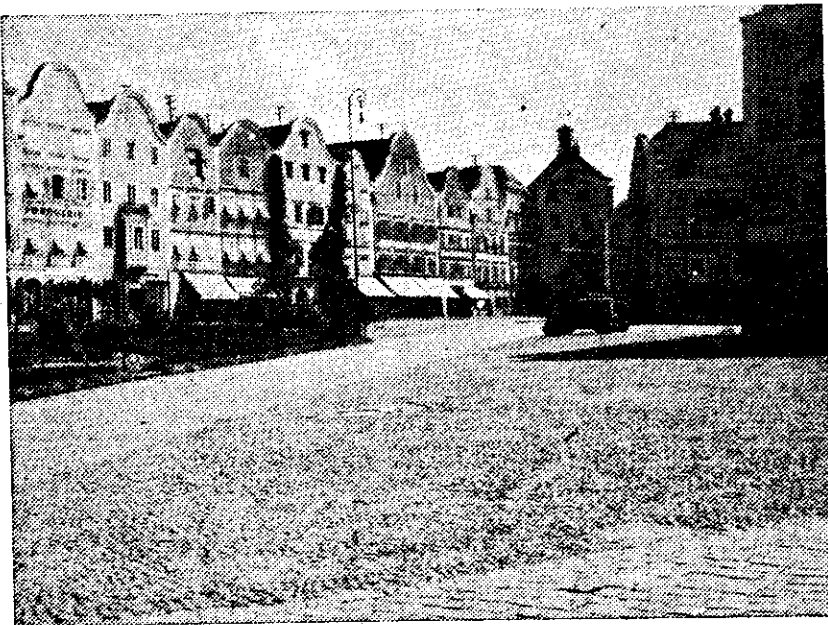
At the inn, which was also the listed canoe-station, a laughing whiskered man who seemed to be a farmer, was telling the familiar tale, the tale that leads straight to Maidanek and Belsen, Buchenwald and Dachau, the tale strangers have told me in various places, not excluding Wellington: "An intelligent man like you, though, can see who's behind everything that goes wrong, the Jews." Back in those days one was supposed to answer "Yes, that's right, the Jews and the cyclists." And if the Nazi then obliged by asking the right question: "Why the cyclists?" one answered, "Why the Jews?" and had him on toast.

It is useless, though, to bandy logic with despair, and Austria was in such a state of poverty that no one could believe that any change whatsoever could possibly be for the worse, and a Nazi

invasion was the only change seriously offering. Such a change could hardly be for the worse, thought the unemployed without food, the peasant farmers without money, the middle class without security; and the change might possibly be for the better. It seemed the only hope.

AT Kufstein we cashed travellers' cheques in exchange for Austrian and German currency, and bought supplies of local produce: fruit, black bread, smoked bacon to be eaten raw, and cheese from the mountains blended in the making with vast quantities of pepper. We stowed our gear in the canoes again, and put them in the water facing upstream, which is the standard technique. A few strokes of the right-hand paddles put the bows into the current, and the canoes spun round, headed for the frontier.

The frontier was as absurd as all other frontiers, and we witnessed there an operation of international trade. A truck-driver who had come into Germany from Austria spent at least an hour waiting about while a couple of customs men spent an equal time measuring the exact length and thickness of each small tree-trunk in his truck-load of timber, calculating the tax of a few pfennigs, finding change and stamping the end of each bit of wood on which duty had been paid, by hitting it with an implement resembling a pole-axe. The place was also notable as the only place where we heard "Heil Hitler!" clearly articulated, by a woman who raised her right arm smartly to greet the truck-driver. Our Austrian companion told us that "Drei litre"—that is, three litres, or five pints near enough—had been a popular version in beerhalls until it became strictly *verboten*. The greeting which the Terror imposed upon everyone was



RUSH HOUR scene in Braunau, Hitler's birthplace. The state of economic stagnation which existed in Austria made things easy for the Nazi cause



CANOE by the Inn at Kufstein, Austria, 45 miles south-east of Munich

usually condensed to "Heitler!" But foreigners like ourselves took the risk of replying with the traditional "Grüss Gott!" The best version we collected was "Tiddler," yelled at our little *faltboot* by a bargee aboard his cumbrous drifting craft out in midstream.

WHEN the load of timber had gone, the customs men had time to attend to us. The stamp in my passport reads *Zollamt Windshausen 22.8.36*. We had officially entered Germany. The country became open, lush and green, and when we landed towards sundown and started to erect tents, mosquitoes assembled in vast clouds above the poles. We packed up again and walked to a near-by farm.

A usual feature in all German farms, and one which is of considerable convenience to fugitives, poor travellers and the like, is the big high-pitched roof in which the hay is stored. When a fire in the haystack means a fire in the home, no risks are taken with damp hay. Time is cheap, and a common sight in the mountains is a field covered with what look like thousands of African witch-doctors standing in rows, and which are really rows of short upright poles with the hay tied on to them by hand for drying.

We made use of the kitchen stove as well as of the hayloft, and had tea in the farm kitchen Bavarian fashion, frying up a meal which was eaten straight from the pan by the ravenous multitude sitting round it in a circle. Washing up was thus reduced to one frying-pan and four forks, a considerable achievement! We were watched by all the family, including a baby of about 18 months, who was the worst case of what Germans call "The English Disease" that I have ever seen outside a hospital. The child had advanced rickets. How it can be that farm children sometimes get insufficient milk and sunshine is hard to understand.

WE got going once more, and passed under the broad concrete bridge of an *autobahn*, all ready set for the invasion of Austria. It was difficult to admire the scenery, because not far north

of us was Munich, and not far out of Munich was Dachau concentration camp, and we knew then almost as well as everyone knows now, what went on inside such places.

We came to Rosenheim, where our canoes were made, and the main impression was of crowds of unfriendly young people in absurdly new and theatrical-looking peasant costumes, an odd aspect of Hitler nationalism. There was Wasserburg, a lovely old town enclosed by a loop of the river, where the people seemed few and suspicious, and Mühl-dorf, a smaller place and more friendly, where beach-combings from the river were nailed to the wall of a shed to form a bogus museum. An old boot was labelled as worn by Napoleon at Waterloo, a bone was the rib of Adam from which Eve was made, each piece of junk being assigned to some departed celebrity. As the local humour is mainly based upon human parasitology, vermiform pieces of willow-root held special prominence in this museum.

On the Austrian bank we saw a bathing party of four young men, and waved to them as unpolitically as possible. What we got back was two Communist salutes and two Nazi ones! If those two rival illegal opposition parties were on speaking terms in Austria, it meant, we thought, that the Schuschnigg Government must be very highly unpopular.

AT Braunau, Hitler's birthplace further along the Austrian bank, we landed for a midday ice-cream. A successor to Alois Hitler sat at the receipt of customs, and may sometimes have exacted some tribute, but he was idle while we were there, and the only money we saw go into that small dead town on the grey plain was just the price of four ice-creams—which makes a poor day's business for even a small town.

We kept to the Austrian bank, spending a night at Scharding and a night at Wernstein. There was a youth with a mouth-organ and no passport, who wanted us to canoe him over to the promised land of Germany, where he said his brother had a job for him. There was a customs man who told us he never

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