

CHRISTMAS IN A CONCENTRATION CAMP

"Heilige Nacht," But Cold Comfort For Germany's Oppressed

Written for "The Listener" by "REFUGEE"

THREE or four months ago we printed an account by a refugee of an average day in a German concentration camp. This is an account by the same writer of Christmas Day in that camp—not a remote Christmas Day, but Christmas, 1938, the last before the outbreak of war.

DECEMBER, 1938. Last day before Christmas. It is a cold European winter day with much snow. "We shall have a white Christmas," everybody said. But it is not the usual Christmas feeling with the whole house smelling of Christmas tree and honey cakes. No last-minute shopping, no glittering windows. The snow is like a shroud. The short day changes into dusk and night. Now the big lamps surrounding the camp in a glaring wreath are switched on. They light up a space of more than a square mile, fenced with barbed wire, loaded at night with strong electric current. About 10,000 prisoners live there in one of Hitler's torture chambers, only the chamber is a town.

The work of the day has come to an end now. The small spare time has begun. The prisoners have been ten hours without a spell for warming in the biting frost of a stormy winter day. How happy they are to return to their barracks. They wolf the only warm meal of the day. Afterwards they are busy to prepare their cold lunch for the following day—they have half an hour for it in the open air—from the rations which are distributed after dinner. Meanwhile it has become 7 o'clock and we go to sleep on our straw mattresses or on the floor, covered with two blankets only in spite of the cruel frost. We have to get up at 5 a.m. again, when there is still the cold and dark winter night outside, to face the hardships of weather and work. Nobody knows when this will end. Detention in the camp is unlimited.

"A Certain Wave of Hope"

In spite of this gloomy outlook a certain wave of hope is running through the camp. To-morrow is Christmas Eve and many of them think that a Christmas amnesty will be announced for them to-morrow. Most of them were arrested without any trial on account of their Jewish descent, or because they had rejected too poorly paid jobs; some on account of terms served already several years ago. Thus they are convinced that a detention without trial and sentence could not last for ever and indefinitely.

Christmas time would be the time for mercy, for an amnesty. Nothing can deprive them of this conviction, not even the assurance of "older" prisoners—that means prisoners who are already several years in the camp—that Hitler never gives amnesties. "Concentration camps have their own rules," say the experienced people. There is no need for reasons of detention. As a rule a term in a concentration camp is at least two years.

Their opinion is confirmed sadly by the events of next morning. Four prisoners out of 10,000 are released on this day. That is the expected Christmas amnesty! Many of the prisoners are deeply depressed and in despair. But still there run other rumours of better food for Christmas. This possibility is admitted by "older" prisoners. Indeed, when we came back after work in the evening, every man gets a sausage about six inches in length and some biscuits as an extra ration, which one could buy for about sixpence. There is still another sensational attraction. We get sweet tea. This is not only an exception, because as a rule no drink is given with the warm meal. But it is sweet tea. The black coffee that we get in the early morning never contains any sugar.

Music and Madness

But the best gift was that we were allowed to listen-in to the broadcast. The wireless played beautiful Christmas music. Many of my fellow prisoners had gone to bed already. I had not yet found the peace of my soul and listening to the sweet strains of "Silent Night, Holy Night" I felt very bitter. One Christmas carol after the other sounded, the beautiful movements of Handel, Bach, and other geniuses were blasphemous in this surrounding. At last my bitterness dissolved into tears. I realised that in spite of all my misery there is something higher and divine in this world which makes it worth while to live and suffer. I wondered if the star of peace would ever shine over this world of madness.

The commander had been allowed to pay to the Jewish prisoners some money of their private funds again, which they had got perhaps from their families. This had been stopped for six weeks on account of the assassination of Herr von Rath, secretary of the German Embassy in Paris, on November 9. So again we could buy additional food, which was a great ease under these hard



CHARLIE CHAPLIN shows how dictators would spend their Christmas if he had his way. In "The Dictator," the "big shot" of Tomania, Adenoid Hynkel, has the tables turned on him and ends up in a concentration camp

conditions. What a life, where a cup of sweetened tea and a piece of sausage means riches already!

Allowed to Write Home

Christmas Day was a Sunday, on which day as a rule we had to work like on any other day. Therefore interested discussions took place if this Sunday would be a working day too. So we were surprised very agreeably when it was announced that Christmas Day would be a holiday for us. We also were allowed to write home. For a long time we had desired this opportunity in vain, but when we had obtained it, it was a very hard task to do, for we knew that the censorship was very severe indeed and that only a certain number of words were allowed, which must contain no relation to the camp. So our hearts were full, but all we could write mostly was the following: "I am well and hope to hear the same from you and the children. I received your letter and I hope you will receive mine." This big letter was written in the morning. At lunch time we had a warm meal again. Now a warm sausage with some vegetable. This had never occurred. In the afternoon sweet tea again. After this tea some prisoners entered our barrack to sing some merry songs. But nobody gave real attention, because all our thoughts were at home.

Poetry and Prophecy

Next day—what you call Boxing Day, we worked only in the morning. We could enjoy a free afternoon. New Year's

Day was also a free day, probably because it was a Sunday also. We enjoyed the rest. The food and everything else was like on any other day. In the morning a prisoner, a well-known poet already in spite of his youth, entered our barrack and secretly recited some of his poems, which he had written in the camp in the evening after his exhausting day's work. He began with some sarcastic poems, ridiculing the hope of the prisoners to be released. Nobody laughed at these jokes, because everybody understood the bitterness of his humour. He finished with a poem named "Last Will." Here he asked his wife not to mourn for him and to find new happiness, for "each tear will disturb my rest," he said in a beautiful rhyme. We were all deeply impressed by this poem, because it seemed to illustrate our own situation. Then one of us, a Hungarian journalist, said: "Let us hope that we come out still, before a war breaks out. I am afraid it is imminent and unavoidable. Germany has now much more power than she can hold really. This whole development is like an engine or an avalanche which cannot be stopped. It must lead to war and the downfall of Fascism."

This prophecy was made on the first day of January, 1939. The first part is fulfilled already. That the second part of it may come true, as it undoubtedly will, is my Christmas and New Year wish for myself, the British Empire, and the whole world.